02
Fallout
EQUESTRIA

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Fallout

EQUESTRIA

By Kkat

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Introduction

Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria…

…there came an era when the ideals of friendship gave way to greed, selfishness, paranoia and a jealous reaping of dwindling space and natural resources. Lands took up arms against their neighbors. The end of the world occurred much as we had predicted – the world was plunged into an abyss of balefire and dark magic. The details are trivial and pointless. The reasons, as always, purely our own. The world was nearly wiped clean of life. A great cleansing; a magical spark struck by pony hooves quickly raged out of control. Megaspells rained from the skies. Entire lands were swallowed in flames and fell beneath the boiling oceans. Ponykind was almost extinguished, their spirits becoming part of the ambient radiation that blanketed the lands. A quiet darkness fell across the world…

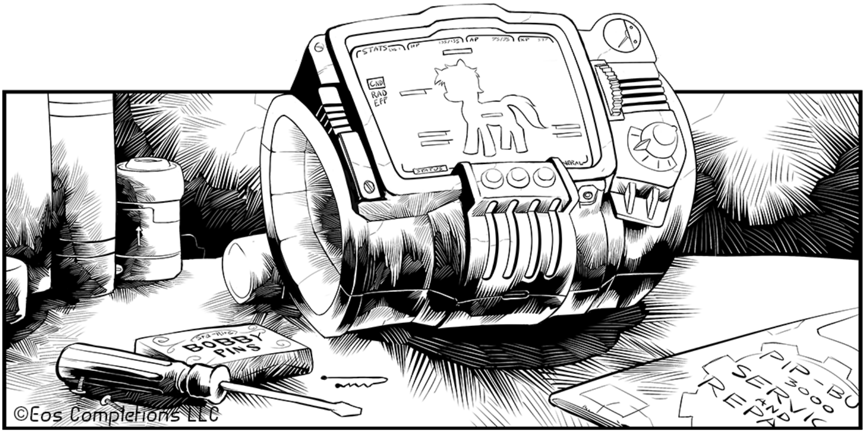
…But it was not, as some had predicted, the end of the world. Instead, the apocalypse was simply the prologue for another bloody chapter in pony history. In the early days, thousands were spared the horrors of the holocaust by taking refuge in enormous underground shelters known as Stables. But when they emerged, they had only the hell of the wastes to greet them. All except those in Stable Two. For on that fateful day when spellfire rained from the sky, the giant steel door of Stable Two swung closed, and never re-opened.

Volume One

Equestrian Wasteland

PROLOGUE

Of PipBucks and Cutie Marks



If I'm going to tell you about the adventure of my life – explain how I got to this place with these people, and why I did what I'm going to do next – I should probably start by explaining a little bit about PipBucks.

What is a PipBuck? A PipBuck is a device, worn on a foreleg just above the hoof, issued to every pony in a Stable when they become old enough to start work. A blending of unicorn pony magic and science, your PipBuck will keep a constant measure of your health and even help administer healing poultices and other medicine, track and organize everything in your saddlepacks, assist in repairs, and keep all manner of notes and maps available at a hooftap. Plus, it allows you to listen to the Stable broadcast whenever you would like as it can tune into and decrypt just about any radio frequency. And that's not all. A pony's PipBuck generates an E.F.S. (Eyes-Forward Sparkle) that will indicate direction and help gauge whether the ponies or creatures around you are hostile. And, perhaps most impressively, a PipBuck can magically aid you in a fight for brief periods of time through use of the S.A.T.S. (Stable-Tec Arcane Targeting Spell). Oh, and a feature not to be forgotten: it can keep track of the location of tagged objects or people, including the wearers of other PipBucks. So if a pony somehow got lost – don't ask me how you could get lost in a Stable, but it does happen on occasion – then anypony who knew the lost pony's tag could find them instantly.

It can even be made to glow like a lamp.

So yes, PipBucks really are a testament to unicorn pony arcane science. And yes, having a PipBuck is a big advantage. So with how wonderful and miraculous all that just sounded, it's hard to impress upon ponies who never lived in a Stable just how ordinary, how *pedestrian,* a PipBuck was in the eyes of the ponies living in Stable Two. And why I was disappointed to have one as my cutie mark.

Every pony in Stable Two had a PipBuck. All that stuff I mentioned? Most ponies don't use even half of that. They just used it to tune into the Stable broadcast – listened to the sweet, sweet voice of Velvet Remedy in the evenings or the latest school singing competitions during the day. The Stable had two soccer leagues, one which allowed S.A.T.S. and one which prohibited it. Otherwise, most ponies paid their PipBucks almost no attention at all. The Overmare issues each pony their own PipBuck on the day of their Cutie Mark Party – usually a day or two after you get the mark on your flanks that tells everypony what makes you special, what you're destined to be good at. Once it shows, the Overmare knows what work to assign you; you know your place in the Stable. So no, I was not thrilled that what made me special was something that everypony had, which was a lot like being told I wasn't special at all. Sure, getting a PipBuck as my cutie mark could have meant I was destined to become an awesome PipBuck repair filly or something, but in reality it was like getting a cutie mark of a cutie mark.

Didn't help that I was the last pony to get her cutie mark. Not surprising in retrospect. Kinda tough to find what you're supposed to be good at when what you're supposed to be good at is something you don't get until you've found what you're supposed to be good at. So I tried everything. I even tried to invent new things. As a unicorn pony myself, my innate magics allow me a level of fine manipulation that earth ponies don't enjoy. Any pony can hold a key in their teeth and open a lock, but using multiple tools in a very delicate operation? That requires precision levitation. So I decided to learn to pick locks with a bobby pin and screwdriver. And I was even getting pretty good at it. Unfortunately, it didn't get me my cutie mark. It just got me into trouble.

I even, to my humiliation, went through the C.A.T. (Cutie-mark Aptitude Test) in the hopes it would guide me to what made me special. But no. My C.A.T. was utterly average, with only marginally higher scores in a couple areas, indicating that I might be suited for work as a PipBuck Technician or a Stable Loyalty Inspector. Two options, I should note, that were even less impressive when you considered that it was generally expected that unicorn ponies would go into either technical or administrative work. That is, except the unicorn ponies who are natural artists, like Velvet Remedy. As I said before, our inherent magic allows us the sort of fine manipulation that technical work demands. Likewise, the Overmare and her government were always unicorn ponies. It is the Overmare's unicorn magic, after all, that creates the false sunlight used to grow our underground apple orchard. And while our apples might not look like those beautiful red things in the old books, they are what keep us alive.

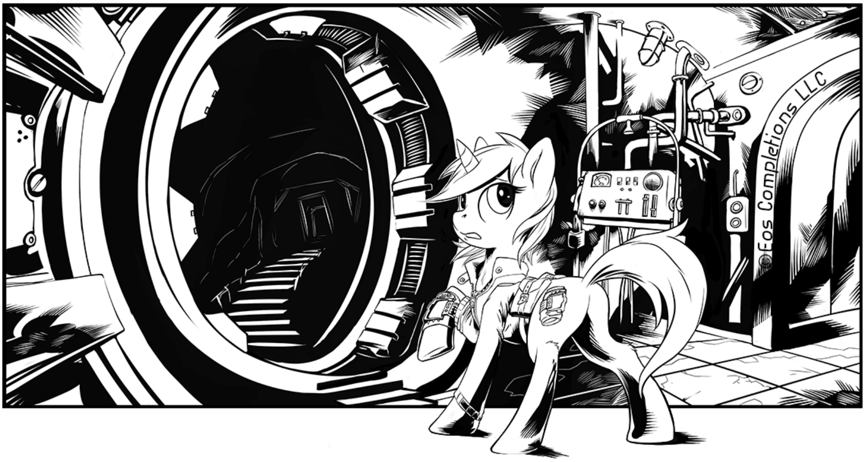
It was only because they let me try my hooves at both positions that I gained access to a PipBuck before receiving my own, otherwise I might *never* have gotten my cutie mark.

Oh, my name is LittlePip. Go figure. I was given the name because I was the youngest and the smallest, and even my mother had the good sense not to call me "Pipsqueak." (Not that I don't love her, but when a filly's cutie mark is a glass of hard apple cider...) Anyway, funny how names like that turn out sometimes.

Pleased to meet you. Here is my story…

Chapter One

Out of the Stable



"Because in Stable Two, no pony ever enters and no pony ever leaves."

Grey.

The walls of the maintenance stalls were all a very monotonous, dull grey. The particular wall I was staring at had the merit of being a very clean grey. PipBucks were notoriously hardy and reliable, so being the Stable's PipBuck Technician meant that there were long periods of nothing to do. Being the PipBuck Technician's apprentice meant that I was assigned all the mundane daily chores while my trainer took extended naps in the back room. Chores like cleaning the walls.

"This wall needs a mural."

I let myself fantasize, picturing the Overmare agreeing and ordering Palette herself to turn our entire stall into one of her brightly colorful masterpieces. Palette was the greatest painter in Stable Two, and like every skilled artist, that made her a stable treasure. Life in Stable Two inevitably began to eat at your spirit – you were born in the Stable, you lived your whole life in the Stable, you were going to die there, and the course of your life was largely laid out for you to see by your Cutie Mark Party. So the Overmare insisted that a new song be added to the Stable broadcast's repertoire each week, that public areas were brightly painted and adored with uplifting and motivational murals, that regular parties were planned in the atrium… all in an effort to distract and stave off depression.

Reality came crashing back as I stared at the eternally blank grey. Beautifying maintenance areas was tragically low priority already, and the PipBuck Technician stall was one of the least trafficked parts of maintenance. I felt my ears droop as I started to realize that I'd be staring at this same grey wall nearly every day for the rest of my life.

"Oh dear. Is it really *that* bad."

And there she was. Velvet Remedy, the gorgeous charcoal-coated unicorn with streaks of color in her white mane and with a voice as smooth as silk and rich as finest chocolate, was standing in the doorway of my stall. I felt immediately grateful that I had finished the cleaning and simultaneously ashamed that the room was so beneath her.

I couldn't believe she was standing there. I'd seen her on the stage above us at late parties; I'd listened to her songs incessantly, recording every new one on my PipBuck so that I didn't have to wait to hear it again. I'll admit it now, I'd had a crush on Velvet Remedy for years. Me and at least three hundred other ponies. My mother used to laugh at that. "LittlePip," she would say, chortling with her friends, "Velvet Remedy's barn door doesn't swing that way." It took me a couple years to understand what my mother had meant by that. And took me several seconds to process that Velvet Remedy had just asked me something.

"W-wha-huh?"

Wonderful response, LittlePip. So elegant. I wanted to dig my way through the concrete floor and pull the chunks over the top of me.

She smiled sweetly. She smiled at me! And in that amazing voice, "You looked so heartbroken when I came in. Is there anything I can do?"

Velvet Remedy offered. To help. Me.

I was shocked back to my senses. Velvet Remedy must have some reason to be down here. Some PipBuck reason. It wasn't like she would just go wandering around maintenance, after all. Looking around, I realized that I was the only pony on duty. My teacher was, as usual, asleep in his office.

"Oh… no, it was n-nothing." I tried to regain composure. "How may I be of assistance?"

Velvet Remedy's expression was both compassionate and unconvinced, but she lifted a forehoof, raising her PipBuck up to my gaze. A more elegant model than mine, with her initials and cutie mark (a beautiful bird with wings outstretched and beak opened in song) embellishing it tastefully. "I hate to be a bother, but it's begun to chafe. Could you replace the padding?"

"Oh, absolutely!" I was already levitating the special keys used to unlock a PipBuck from a pony's foreleg (as an apprentice PipBuck Technician, I had all manner of special precision tools in the pockets of my utility barding). "I'll have it done in right quick!" The PipBuck came off with a click.

Velvet Remedy chuckled hesitantly, lowering her hoof. "Oh no, that's all right. Take your time. I'm going to put some salve on this leg back in my room and rest up for the afternoon."

That's right! Velvet Remedy was performing at the Stable Two Saloon tomorrow night! I would have to polish it up, make it worthy of being worn above her hoof. If I spent all night on it, I could give it a full tune-up, have it running as smoothly as the day she got it, and still have it back to her before the show.

"All right! I'll have it back to you by this time tomorrow. You won't be disappointed. I promise!"

She smiled at me again, and all the grey in the world couldn't darken my day. "Thank you." And then she turned to go. I watched as her cutie mark disappeared around the doorway. Then she was gone.

* * *

The next day, I was whistling one of Velvet Remedy's songs as I walked down the halls towards her room. Her PipBuck was hovering along beside me in a field of magical levitation, freshly padded with the best lining I could find, looking shiny and new. I was tired from a long night or work, but in high spirits. Velvet Remedy was going to be so happy with my work!

Turning the corner, I was startled out of my reverie by the mass of ponies gathered outside Velvet Remedy's room. Damn, I was going to have to battle my way through hoof-print seekers and paparazzi. Levitating the PipBuck higher, I started to shove my way into the crowd.

"She's gone!" "How could she leave?" The hushed voices and panicked whinnies around me grew alarming. "Why would she abandon us?"

Gone? Velvet Remedy was… gone?

And then the words that stopped me cold. "I didn't think the Stable door even could open!"

She was gone *outside?!?*

"Don't worry, everypony!" boomed the voice of the Overmare from somewhere in the crowd. "I have the tag of each and every pony in the Stable. I will personally send out a rescue party. We'll have our Velvet back by the end of the day. Worry not."

I felt I was drowning in cold, wet cement. My gaze slowly moved up towards the PipBuck floating above me.

I lowered my head, slowly trying to back out of the crowd, curling the floating PipBuck close. When the Overmare brought up Velvet Remedy's tag, it would lead everypony not to Velvet but to her PipBuck sitting in the maintenance…

With a thump, I backed into somepony, startling me enough that the levitation field evaporated in a poof and the clean and shiny PipBuck clattered to the floor.

Turning, I found myself eye-to-eye with the Overmare.

She didn't speak, her gaze turning to the PipBuck on the ground. Velvet Remedy's initials and cutie mark clearly visible.

"What. Is. This?" The Overmare spoke slowly, dangerously.

All eyes turned to me. I could feel every pair of eyes. Nobody spoke. The silence bore down like a lead blanket. My mouth went dry. I couldn't find my voice.

I didn't need to. I could feel the wave of loathing. Dozens of Velvet Remedy fanponies, and I was the pony holding the reason why their idol was lost to them.

The Overmare's voice was low and surprisingly gentle. "Take it and go to your room. Swiftly."

She didn't need to tell me twice.

* * *

I lay on my bed that evening, poking at Velvet Remedy's PipBuck as the radio in my own played yet another re-iteration of the tragedy of the day.

I couldn't believe it. Velvet Remedy was gone. I couldn't understand. How could she leave? Why would she go?

The door out of Stable Two was closed and sealed. Only the Overmare knew the secrets to opening it, assuming it even could open. Which, obviously, it could.

But why? Nobody really knew what was outside, if there was anything out there at all. Historical books suggested the world outside was blasted, lifeless and poisonous. That was, at least, the common and logical assumption. But a ghost story somepony told at my first (and only) slumber party had given me horrible nightmares and still lurked in the shadows of my head: a tale of a pony who somehow got the Stable door open and stepped outside… only to find out that there *was* no outside! Just a great nothingness that whisked the pony away, devouring her soul so that she was nothingness too.

Empirically, I knew that wasn't the case, but the mental image still haunted me.

The two things I did understand was that Velvet Remedy had gotten me to remove her PipBuck so the Overmare couldn't track her with it, and that I was screwed.

Being the smallest pony my age, and the last to get my cutie mark, did not facilitate building friendships with my peer ponies. Mother honestly didn't help either. Nor did waking up screaming at my first slumber party. So I was used to being alone. But I'd never had enemies before. I'd been beneath the notice of other ponies, but I'd never had one hate me.

I really couldn't blame them either, even though it totally wasn't fair. They were upset and hurt and needed a scapegoat. The news hadn't mentioned me by name, just "Velvet Remedy's custom-decorated PipBuck was found in the possession of a PipBuck Technician pony", but with a whole *two* of us, it wasn't hard for everypony to figure out, even without the scene outside her room earlier.

The Overmare was speaking on the radio. "We are all feeling this loss. But I want to remind everypony that Velvet Remedy chose to do this. She chose to leave her home. To abandon us, her family. She betrayed my trust and she betrayed yours, just as she betrayed the trust of the pony who she tricked into removing her PipBuck, ensuring we could not find her. I know many of you are angry or hurt. I urge you to direct that anger where it truly belongs…"

As thankful as I was for her words, it wasn't going to change the resentment that I would face every day, even if every pony kept it to themselves. It hung in the air like old smoke.

I distracted myself with the errant PipBuck, taking note of an encrypted file. I had spotted it yesterday, figuring it was probably an unfinished new song. I didn't want to open it then, both out of respect for Velvet Remedy's privacy and a dislike of spoilers, but I guessed it didn't matter anymore. The song would never be played.

Opening a pouch on my utility barding, I withdrew an access tool that would allow me to remove the encryption safely and easily. It was a sound file. I played it.

"The override code for opening the door to Stable Two is… CMC3BFF."

I shot up in surprise at what I had heard. Swiftly, I turned off the radio and played it again.

I didn't recognize the voice. It was female, kinda sweet, and had a strange accent that didn't sound like anyone in the Stable. But now I knew how Velvet Remedy left.

I must have sat there for hours, contemplating what I should do. But finally, I made my choice.

I was going to go outside after her. I was going to bring her back.

I stood there, staring at the huge steel door that sealed Stable Two away from the horrors (or nothingness!) outside. And at the two guard ponies who blocked my way. I had my saddlebags packed with apples and necessities. Even a Big Book of Arcane Sciences for something to read. I had two canteens around my neck. I was ready to go. But the Overmare was making sure there were no follow-up acts.

Insistence and glowering looks weren't getting me anywhere. My horn was glowing, but they stood their ground, unimpressed. They weren't going to let me anywhere near the control panel.

"Hey, aren't you the filly who let our Velvet get lost outside anyway?" one of the guards inquired daringly, taking a bullying step forward. The other guard looked away in disgust. I'm not sure if he was disgusted at me, or if he felt like the Overmare seemed to about ponies wanting to take it out on me. I was kinda hoping it was the former, considering what I was about to do to them.

THUD!

The metal footlocker above them dropped onto their heads, knocking both out cold. Earth ponies – they never see that levitating-something-up-behind-you trick coming.

I was at the controls, entering the passcode from Velvet Remedy's PipBuck when the Overmare's voice boomed through nearby speakers.

"Stop! I order you to stop this instant!"

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen.

"Guards! I want every guard pony at Stable Two door! Stop that filly!"

Oh crap!

My hooves flew up to the main switch for the door, and I prayed to Celestia that the code worked. Then, with all my strength, I threw the switch.

A loud clanging filled the air, followed by a hissing of steam and a great rumble that shook the room. As I watched, the massive bolt that held the door from Stable Two shut slid back. A huge hinge-arm swung down, attaching itself to the door, and with a teeth-hurting squeal, pulled the massive steel door out and away.

Randomly, I found myself thinking in my mother's voice "Stable Two's barn door doesn't swing that way." The door to Stable Two wasn't supposed to swing at all. Even though I threw the switch, I was stunned to see it actually open.

"You don't have to do this… LittlePip, isn't it?" The Overmare's voice kicked me out of my stupor. I could hear the hooves of galloping guards drawing near.

I took a step towards the door. "Don't worry. I'll bring her back."

"No you won't! If you leave here, you'll never be let back in!"

For a moment, the unfairness stung. The Overmare was willing to send out a search party to bring Velvet Remedy back. But then, Velvet was special, and I was… not.

Part of me wanted to turn back right there, crawl back to my room and my dreary but safe life.

Drawing myself up, I stepped out the door.

⁂

With a final hiss and clang, the steel door of Stable Two closed irrevocability behind me.

I don't know what I expected to find just beyond the door, but it certainly wasn't this long, dark hallway that smelled of rotting timbers and sepulcher air. I was no longer in the Stable. But I wasn't outside yet either. I was in limbo.

I turned on my PipBuck's light, and recoiled with a gasp at the skeletons of long-dead ponies which littered the hall. The outside of the Stable door was marred from where ponies had slammed on it until their hooves cracked and shattered, trying to get in.

Moving forward quickly, I discovered that the hallway opened into an old room with stairs leading up to a horizontal door with a shattered lock. The entrance from the outside world into Stable Two had been cleverly disguised as the door to a humble apple cellar. And by disguised, I meant that the person who built it had been building an apple cellar.

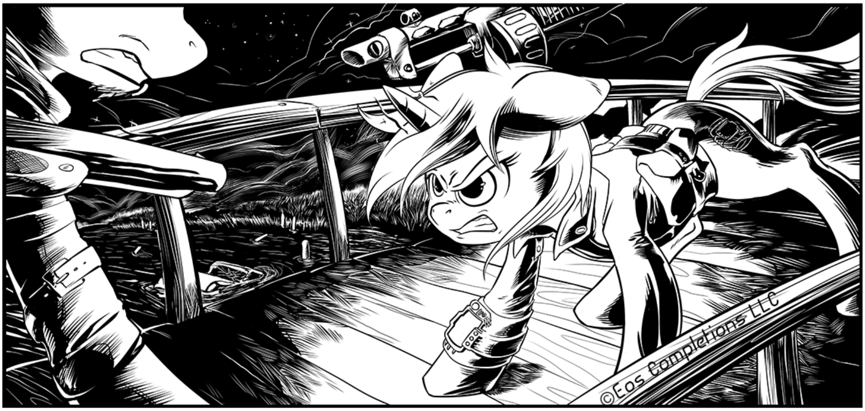
Taking a deep breath, I trotted up the stairs, swung open the cellar door, and stepped outside.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Cherchez La Filly – +10% damage to the same sex and unique dialogue options with certain ponies.

Chapter Two

Equestrian Wasteland



"What world do you live in? Out here in the real world, blood flows, little pony. Blood flows…"

Nothingness!

My first several seconds outside were a heart-bursting eternity of hoof-pounding terror! The story had been right! All that was outside was a great black nothingness! It surrounded me, suffocating. If I had been able to draw breath, I would have screamed.

And then my eyes started to adjust to the darkness. I began to calm, gasping, feeling weak (and not just a little foolish). In my defense, I had never experienced *night* before. Not really. Sure, I'd always turned off the lights before curling into bed, but that darkness was small, confined to my little room. And there was always the glow from under the door. The hall lights of Stable Two were eternal.

This was different. A cool air, quite unlike anything within the Stable, tickled my coat and chilled my skin beneath. It bore smells that were dank and rotting, dusty and alien. I could hear the sounds of night insects, creaking of wood and a far-off sloshing… but I was struck more by what I *couldn't* hear – the constant low hum of the Stable's generators and the ever-present high whine of the lights were gone – so powerful in their absence that I first mistook the outside as silent. I could feel dirt and broken stone beneath my hooves, so unlike the smooth and sterile floors I had trotted all my life. And though I could not see much or far, I could see further than I had ever seen before, and there were no walls to mark the end of the room. I was staring into a horizontal abyss that stretched out from me in every direction.

An entirely new panic began to form within me. My hind legs went out from under me and I sat, stunned. I turned my gaze to the ground, breathing deeply, thanking it not only for holding me up, but being a visual endpoint. Then I made the mistake of looking up into the sky, and the absolute endless up-ness of it sent my head spinning and my stomach lurching. Great masses of clouds rolled over most of the sky; but there were gaps through which soft light poured and through those I could see the up went on forever. Insanely, I thought of the clouds as a great net, made to catch me if I fell from the earth into the yawning gulf above; but if I slipped through the holes, I would just fall up forever.

I clenched my eyes shut and tried to keep from vomiting.

The fear and queasiness was intense but passing. Once my faculties returned, I began to notice those things that had escaped me in my initial panic. The surrounding terrain was becoming evident. The world around me did not stretch out evenly; the ground heaved and rolled – hills creeping towards mountains. The earth was punctured by the upthrusting black fingers of long-dead trees. Along distant hilltops, I could see the swaying, leaf-shrouded branches of healthier woods, but the living trees near Stable Two were few, scattered and sickly.

Second, I noticed that my PipBuck was flashing with a host of alerts. The map-maker was already beginning to do its work on my new and unfamiliar surroundings, and to my surprise had already pulled a label from the ether: Sweet Apple Acres.

Turning around to get my bearings, my eyes were drawn to the large, hollowed husk of what I assumed had once been a magnificent house. Now, it creaked and swayed in the breeze as if threatening to collapse.

Looking to my PipBuck again, I noticed that it was picking up several radio transmissions. The radio broadcast from Stable Two was dark, but new stations had taken its place. My heart leapt, for it was the first indication that there might be pony life out here after all. I nudge my PipBuck to start playing the first station on the list.

> *"…still sealed up. There is no way inside. My son, he ate one of the apples from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he's terribly sick. Too sick to move. We've holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We're running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us… Message repeats. Hello? Is there anypony out there? Please, we need help! I was bringing my family to the Stable up near Sweet Apple Acres when we were attacked by raiders. Only my son and I survived. We made it to the Stable, but it's still sealed up. There is no way inside. My son, he ate one of the apples from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he's terribly sick. Too sick to move. We've holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We're running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us… Message repeats. Hello?…"*

A voice was filled with a terrible resignation, as if the pony had already given up hope and was just going through the motions. Shaken, I turned it off. I didn't think I could bear to hear it again. That is when I noticed the soft ticking from my PipBuck. Checking it over, I discovered that its radiation detector – a feature I had never known to be used, had self-activated. The cute little rainbow dial had always been planted firmly in the green. It was still there, but edging discreetly towards the yellow.

I couldn't just stand here beside what had long, long ago been the door to a simple apple cellar for the rest of my life. Well, I could, but it would be a relatively short and miserable life. A realization was dawning on me: with so many directions to go, what was the likelihood that I would chose the path that Velvet Remedy had followed? Even though she only had a few hours head start, the prospect of finding her was bleak.

But I had to start somewhere. And the best chance I had was to get up high and have a look around. The ruins near me rose higher than any of the nearby trees, and the sheered-off roof of its upper tower was probably the best vantage point I could hope for. I closed my eyes, steadied myself, and went inside.

* * *

What was left of the Sweet Apple Acres building proved sturdier than it looked (or sounded). It was also almost barren, anything of value that had survived had been looted, leaving only scraps that nobody wanted but that time itself seemed unable to erase. Rusted shoes, boxes of soaps for cleaning dresses that no longer existed, a pitchfork with a shattered handle, a rake.

I began up the stairs. My eyes were alerted to a feeble glow, the soft green color of a poisoned apple, bathing the room above. The glow came from the screen of an old terminal, a device of arcane science identical to the ones used throughout Stable Two. It seemed miraculous that it still worked after centuries on the outside. When Stable-Tec built something, they built it to *last.*

Curiosity lured me to it, and my wonder was quickly replaced with understanding. It was no coincidence that this particular terminal was live, for on it was a fresh message:

> To any pony who has left Stable Two in search of me:
>
> Please, go home. I am doing what I have to do. The Overmare understands, even if she can never agree, and I hope one day you will to. I will not be back. Do not look for me. Do not endanger yourself further for my sake. Please forgive me.
>
> Velvet Remedy

I searched the terminal for more, but all the other messages were ancient and corrupted save for one. And that one had a rather unique encryption, something I had heard of but never seen before – a binary encryption such that in order to decrypt it, I would first have to download the message into my PipBuck from both the terminal which had been used to send it and the one upon which it was received.

Having nothing better to do with the vast amounts of storage my PipBuck was capable of, I downloaded it. In reality, I knew that the chances that I would ever come across the companion terminal, much less that it would be functional, were overwhelmingly against me. Nor did I have any reason to believe a message centuries old would be of any significance.

More importantly, I now had to face that outside was my new home. Even if I found Velvet Remedy, it was unlikely that she would accompany me back. I'll admit, I had been subtly entertaining a fantasy where the Overmare would be so delighted with Velvet's return that she would embrace us both back into the herd. Maybe even throw me a party. Now, I was forced to admit how foalish that vision was.

Thinking upon this made my head fill with black clouds. But as I reached the top of the ruins and looked out over the wasteland, a bright light, feeble as it was, flickered in that darkness… just as the light from the campfire, not half an hour's trot distant, poked an orange hole in the night.

* * *

As I approached the circle of firelight, I knew something was off. Something about the way the dusty beige unicorn was laying on his mat of straw, legs curled up under him. Some tenseness in his body language. But it wasn't until I stepped hoof into the light and got a good look – a warm "Hello" dying on my lips – that I saw he was gagged, and caught the glint of the flames against a few expose links in the chains binding his hooves.

"Well lookee here! Walked up all nice and pleasant, didn't she?" A large earth pony emerged from the shadows of a nearby rock. His hooves clacked metallically against the rocky ground, shod in cruelly spiked ponyshoes. Two more ponies slid out of hiding on opposite sides – one another earth pony holding a shovel whose blade had been lethally sharpened, the other a unicorn whose glowing horn levitated towards me a short instrument of wood and metal with two barrels. Each pony wore barding made from thick hide. Much like night, I had never seen a firearm before, save for pictures in books. But those books were more than explicit enough for me to recognize the mortal threat.

The bound unicorn on the mat shook his head with a sad yet derisive look and began trying the scrape the gag away with a forehoof, no longer making effort to keep the chains secret. The three ponies menacing me spared him only the occasional glance.

"Might as well have trussed herself up for us," the gun-wielding unicorn snickered. Then, addressing me, "You wouldn't mind, would you?"

Laughter. "And another unicorn too. She'll fetch a pretty price, this one."

Fetch a price for what? And from whom?

The one holding the shovel-spear in his mouth mumbled something incomprehensible. Then, apparently deciding the gun was sufficient deterrent, spat out his weapon and re-iterated, "By the Go… I mean, look at her! I think she's taken a *bath!*"

I was suddenly and bizarrely aware of how filthy all four of the ponies were, and how foul they smelled. I managed to cover a gag with a sneeze.

"What's going on?" I asked. Of the emotions battling for supremacy in my head, confusion had clawed its way to victory.

The captive unicorn finally succeeded in pulling the filthy gag free. "They're slavers, you idiot."

* * *

Monterey Jack, the dirty beige unicorn with dour expression and a cutie mark that looked like cheese, followed behind me as we trudged alongside our captors, walking a broken path that once was a road. My legs were in chains, making walking difficult and anything more speedy than a trot impossible. My PipBuck had stymied the slavers efforts to bind my forelegs, eventually forcing them to chain me above the knees. Had the one with the shovel-spear not been holding its point dangerously against my throat, the other two would have gotten a few hooves to tender places for their efforts. As it was, they made short work of me.

I was not gagged, but Monterey had convinced me early that unnecessary chatter from the slaves-to-be would likely result in the loss of my tongue. Not that I had much to say to these brutes anyway aside from my repertoire of colorful metaphors. I didn't expect they would answer my questions, even if my tongue should survive the asking, and they were being chatty enough with each other to suffice.

"Hate thef fart," grumbled the earth pony through the spear clenched in his teeth.

"Well then, if you would just learn to swim, we could take the long way, couldn't we?" suggested the unicorn with poisoned sweetness.

"Hate fuffen sweffey." By his smell, decidedly more pungent than the others, I guessed he just hated water in general.

"How about you stop complaining and I'll let you sample one of the slaves before we get to the forest." Their leader, the earth pony named Cracker with the spiked shoes and a cutie mark that looked suspiciously like a whip (or maybe a snake?), turned back towards Monterey and I with a filthy smile.

I looked away. They laughed.

Through their disgusting dialogue, I could hear a liquid sound ahead. Not like a burbling water fountain but closer to a sloughing muck. And… something else. A distant sound, getting closer. Music? Yes, music. Slightly tinny yet… triumphant? Regal? I couldn't put my hoof on exactly what feeling the music was trying to inspire, but it was brightly out-of-place.

Cracker took note of my expression and smirked. "You look like you've never heard that before. What, did you live your life in a Stable? If you're hoping for the cavalry, that ain't it filly. That's just one of those sprite-bots."

The music cut out with a sharp twang.

The unicorn slaver, Sawed-Off, trotted ahead a bit, peering down the path ahead. Turning back to the rest of us, he smirked. "Think one of the radigators got it?"

Cracker suggested it flew into somepony's booby trap. The other earth pony suggested a mouthful of spear-mangled mumbling. The unicorn turned forward again and the glow from his horn illuminated the machine – a metal ball about the size of a foal's head floating on four silently flapping wings – hovering silently right in front of his face. No arcane science this, I could tell; it was pure earth pony engineering.

"FUCK!" Sawed-Off leapt back a full pony's length in surprise. Then swung his shotgun to bear and fired it at the sprite-bot. The sound was like a metal plate falling from the ceiling, and it echoed through the night-darkened hills. Sparks specked the metal ball as it was peppered with scattershot. It let out an electric whine and darted into the darkness.

The unicorn almost took off after it, but Cracker's voice cut the distance between them, "That's enough, Sawed-Off. Save your ammo."

"Dammit, I hate when they pull that stealthy shit. It's a flying fucking radio; it's not supposed to sneak up on ponies."

My ears were burning from the free flow of crude profanity, but I didn't mind. I was mulling over what I had just seen.

"Idiot," muttered Monterey Jack under his breath. "They heard that all the way in Ponyville…"

Unlike my fellow slave, I was pleased to have witnessed the unicorn firing off his weapon. Because now I knew how it worked.

"…What kind of damned fool," Monterey grumbled, "announces his presence this close to raider territory."

A river slithered across our path, its waters slipping and oozing along its banks, half-stagnant. The water lapped and sucked at the supports of a bridge, making the wet sounds I had been hearing. Beyond the bridge lurked the shattered remains of a pre-war town.

The bridge was a maze of barricades. Dark shadows of ponies moved about it. Briefly I may have made the mistake of hoping for rescue; but my eyes were drawn to the spiked poles that lined the bridge, and the still rotting heads of decapitated ponies that adorned two of them.

I tasted bile. The sight was horrific.

"Cager, stay here," Cracker said, finally putting a name to the spear-wielding slaver pony. "Sawed-Off, let's go hear what the toll is this time."

Monterey Jack lowered his head and looked balefully towards the bridge. I moved closer to him, following his example, and hoping that I had positioned myself so Cager couldn't see the faint glow from my horn as I slipped my screwdriver and a bobby pin from my stable utility barding. Like all of the slavers' equipment, the manacles on my legs were crude and of low quality. As Cracker and Sawed-Off argued with the bridge ponies, I focused on picking the first lock. I was rewarded with a soft click as it sprung open, releasing my PipBuck foreleg. The manacle fell to the ground with a little thump.

"Hhu!" Cagey's ears had shot up, and now he moved around to see me. Swiftly, I cut the magic, dropping the screwdriver and bobby pin into the dirt, and hoped that in the darkness the slaver couldn't see the change in my chains.

"Wuf hoo uf foo?" Cagey growled dangerously. The nasty sharp edge of the shovel hovered inches from my eyes.

BLAM!

Cagey turned abruptly, the spear-shovel slashing close enough to my face that I shrieked. The gunshot was from the bridge. It didn't sound like Sawed-Off's shotgun. But the second shot did.

It took Cagey a breath to recognize that crossing the bridge had become a bloody affair. Glowering back at us, his posture threatening, he started to say… something. I suspect he was warning us to stay put, but I'll never know. His head exploded, showering me with gore.

I stood there, eyes wide, shaking with shock. Blood, warm and sticky, ran down my forehead and into my left eye, oozed into my coat and mane.

In the growing list of things I'd not seen before this night, the death of another pony ranked at the top. I blinked, feeling the blood on my eyelid. Cagey was dead! And I had Cagey all over me!!

The urge to throw myself into the river was overwhelming. But I wouldn't get to it like this. Pushed by something more than determination now, my horn once again glowed and I and began to unlock the rest of my manacles.

I spared a glance towards the bridge, seeing Sawed-Off hunkering down beside one of the barricades as he magically pulled his shotgun open, stuffing in more ammo. Two shots, I realized. One at the sprite-bot, one just now. Two shots, and then reload. Closing the weapon, he levitated it up above the barricade and shot blindly into the violent milieu, spraying an already wounded raider pony with scattershot. The pony staggered and fell.

Unfortunately for Sawed-Off, the raider behind him had a different kind of shotgun, one that was faster and not limited to two shots, that fired slugs which tore great holes in the unicorn slaver's body the moment he looked up to see the results of his effort.

I turned away, cringing from the nightmare playing out before me. I focused on the locks.

* * *

I had freed myself and was beginning to free Monterey when two raider ponies trotted off the bridge towards us, stepping over the battle-mutilated corpses of Cracker, Sawed-Off and the raiders they had taken down with them. One of those approaching was the unicorn raider wielding the devastating combat shotgun. The other, an earth pony with a sledgehammer in its teeth. The unicorn was laughing. Not the mean laugh of Cracker, but a crazed laugh that sent chills down the back of my neck.

"Looks like we got ourselves some prizes!"

The earth pony chortled behind the sledgehammer as the unicorn looked us over appraisingly. The two were somehow even filthier than the slavers. The unicorn bore jagged scars across her face and flanks, one of them tearing through her cutie mark, several freshly bleeding. The earth pony was hairless and painfully burned over much of her left side. Both wore barding that looked ragged and cobbled together.

"help us?" I suggested weakly.

"Oh, I'll help myself to you, all right!" The unicorn reared up and gave me a kick, her hoof striking hard into my side. Pain exploded and I dropped, gasping. Rearing up again, she brought her full weight down on me. I howled.

Near me, Monterey let out a wet grunt of pain as the earth pony gave him a taste of her sledgehammer. Leaving me in a crying huddle, the unicorn also turned her attention to the still-chained Monterey. In moments it became clear they intended to beat and bludgeon him until he was another lifeless corpse. And probably not stop then.

"Hold his leg out. I'm gonna shoot his hooves off!" The unicorn raider floated the combat shotgun a foot from Monterey's splayed left hindleg, the only one I had freed from its manacle.

Ignoring the pain, I leapt up, closing the distance and spinning as I gave a fierce back-kick. My hooves connected with the shotgun, sending it flying. It clattered onto the bridge beyond. A moment later, I was levitating the shovel-spear at the two raider ponies who stood facing me with gleeful expressions. Two against one, and both of them were experienced fighters. The one with the sledgehammer stepped closer, as if eager to see if hammer beat knife.

Monterey was on her in an instant, throwing his forelegs over her head, pulling the chain between them across her neck. The sledgehammer fell from her mouth as the raider pony choked.

The unicorn turned, surprised by the sudden change in odds. I could have attacked her then, but threatening a pony is much different than actually attacking one. I wasn't sure I had it in me to slash at another pony, to draw her blood. To maim, or possibly kill.

The unicorn kicked up the fallen sledgehammer and turned to face me with it, murder in her eyes. And suddenly, I found it easy to thrust the shovel-spear forward. I was no longer struggling with following through on a threat; this was survival. Self-preservation is instinctual; it clears away the moral hesitations. And while I did not have the fighting skills of my opponent, I did have an advantage all my own. S.A.T.S.

Aided by the targeting spell of my PipBuck, I sent the spear slashing across her knees, hobbling her. A second slash, this time across her face, relieved her of her weapon. The third would be a killing blow…

…except I wasn't ready to do that. Not yet. Instead, I swung the spear around, cracking her across the head with its handle, hard enough to splinter the wood. The unicorn raider fell at my feet, unconscious.

I looked up. Monterey was standing, chest heaving, over the body of the earth pony raider, the life choked out of her. He was staring at me quietly. Then finally raised a forehoof, only for the chain to clank tight before he had it more than a few inches off the ground.

"Oh!" Dropping the shovel-spear, I turned on the light of my PipBuck and searched about for my screwdriver. I had lost the bobby pin; there was no chance of finding it in the dirt at night. But I had more.

Once we were both free, Monterey limped slowly over to the bridge. A moment later, he returned, his horn glowing a gentle beige. Sawed-Off's shotgun followed him. Before I could react, he aimed it at the head of the unconscious unicorn raider and fired.

Her blood began to seep across the ground towards my hooves. I watched in stunned silence as he turned and began prodding at the bodies, tugging items from them.

Finally, I found my voice. "What are you doing?"

He looked at me as if I was stupid. "Checking to see if they have anything valuable on them. With luck, food." I nodded, watching him move to the bodies at this end of the bridge. Looting the bodies of the dead felt wrong; but a cold, rational part of me murmured that it was a qualm I would have to get over in order to survive. And imagine how embarrassed I'd be if I starved to death out here because I'd been too shy to check a dead pony's bag for a pouch of oats or a can of old applesauce? I moved a bit further down the bridge.

I looked over the body of a dead raider pony, his face bloody and torn from Cracker's ponyshoes. I started to go through the pockets of his barding, but my stomach rebelled, and I flung myself to the railing, heaving my lunch into the foul river below. A large break in the clouds brought a soft and silvery light to everything, and I could see my reflection in the water, still covered with Cagey's drying blood.

Then I saw Sawed-Off's shotgun hovering in the air behind my head.

"I'll be taking what you have too," Monterey Jack informed me with a bored drawl.

"w-What?" I turned slowly to see him standing on the bridge, bathed in moonlight, his horn glowing a soft beige light. The shotgun floated between is, pointed at me.

"b-But I just saved you!"

"Yeah. And for that, I'm not going to kill you." His eyes narrowed. "Unless, of course, you do something stupid right now."

"But I just saved you!"

"Aren't you top of your class," he said snidely.

"We should work together! Travel together!"

Monterey snorted. "And split our limited provisions? Go to sleep with one eye open each night, hoping to catch you when you try to stab me in the back. No thanks."

My righteous disbelief stopped short of denial. Suddenly, I was so very weary. Nodding, I lowered my head and let my two canteens slip free. I then backed up so he could approach them. I turned my head to start unclasping my saddle bags.

I saw it on the bridge just beyond my tail.

Turning back to Monterey, my own horn was glowing. And the combat shotgun whipped into the air. For a long moment, we stood there, two unicorn ponies on a bridge, surrounded by bodies, shotguns floating between us, aimed at each other. Moonlight shone down on us from the break in the clouds.

Monterey Jack broke the silence, "You're not going to use that. I saw you spare that raider. If you couldn't kill a pony like that, you don't have it in you to kill me."

I narrowed my eyes. "I'm a quick study."

He huffed, but didn't move. "Do you even know how to use that thing?"

I forced a smile across my face. "Do you know that you only have one shot left? And judging by the sprite-bot, that gun is in such poor repair I'll survive being shot with it. Will you survive being shot with this as many times as I can move the trigger while you try to reload?"

Monterey Jack took a step back. And with that falter, my smile was no longer forced. "And I'll be taking my canteens back."

* * *

Ponyville. I wondered just how my PipBuck knew the names of places before I did. It even named the wreckage of a building that I had just slipped into. Ponyville was raider territory. I just hoped this place, this "Carousel Boutique", was not crawling with them.

Monterey Jack and I had barely parted ways when the railing of the bridge exploded next to me. A sniper! The same pony, I presumed, who had turned Cagey's head to applesauce. I fled into the town, keeping to what cover there was. Few of the buildings were intact enough to hide in. This was the closest.

Fortunately, I was alone. I waited for nearly an hour, curled up in a shadow near the door; but the sniper pony seemed uninspired to follow me. No, she or he could just wait until I came out.

Fatigue washed over me. I had stayed up all the night before, and this night's events were a strain on both body and spirit. My muscles were weak and achy. My body hurt from the kicks I had taken. I felt emotionally played-out. I needed to sleep. Sleeping here was probably a horrible idea. If I woke up at all, it could be in the hooves of slavers, raiders or possibly worse. But going back outside, finding someplace better, it just wasn't on the table. I was in no shape to test my wits against the sniper pony again.

Carousel Boutique was quite similar in condition to the building up at Sweet Apple Acres, only the looting was more destructive. The walls had been painted with crude images of violence and cruder swear words. A pile of torn-up cloth rotted in a corner, smelling foul, like ponies had urinated on it repeatedly. There were two beds, one of which was stained deeply with blood (and probably more vile things). The other was smaller, a foal's bed, nothing but a mattress on a crushed frame. In my state, I felt it would do wonderfully.

The Carousel Boutique offered two more treasures, a locked chest and another terminal, identical to the one at Sweet Apple Acres. This one too was still functional, again to my surprise. It was locked; slipping out my access tool, I went to work. These terminals were crafted by some of the same ponies who later made the PipBucks, and the encryptions and locks were similar enough that my tools allowed me to get partway through the security. What remained was a puzzle, finding the password within strands of code that my access tool laid bare. In my fried mental state, it was probably a small miracle that I was able to parse the code and find the password.

Or possibly not. The password was "apple".

I laughed aloud, catching myself when I heard the volume of my own voice in the stillness of the decrepit boutique, as I realized that, beyond all realistic chance, this was the computer that the message had been sent to. With an unwarranted feeling of accomplishment, I downloaded it, and let my PipBuck do the rest.

Age had damaged the recording, but there was enough audible for me to recognize that same female voice, kinda sweet and with an odd accent, that had many hours before revealed to me the code that lead me out of my old life and into this new and horrible one.

> *"…special instructions for Stable Two… …that's muh family down there! Until the poison is gone from up here, that door doesn't open for anypony!"*

The voice faded in and out of static.

> *"…know you hate this, Sweetie Belle, but you're an Overmare now. The Overmare of the most important Stable in all of Equestria. I need you to do this for me… …to keep them safe… …best friends forever, remember?…"*

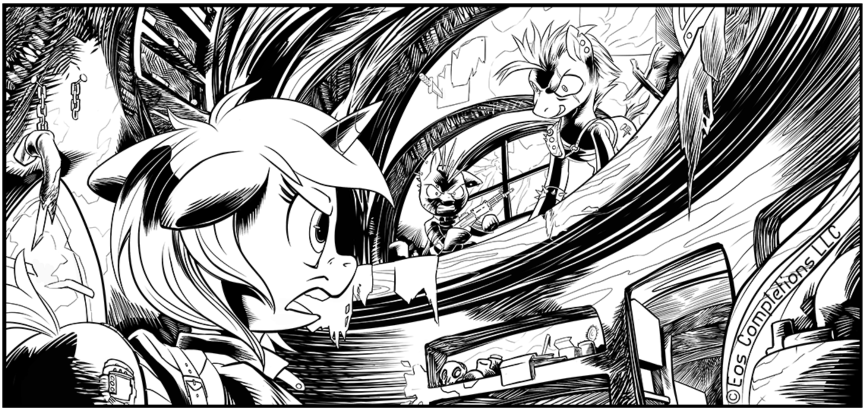
The sound file died with a whimper. I had been right – there was really no value in a two-century old message. I left the chest for the morning, curled up, and went to sleep.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Horse Sense – You are a swift learner. You gain an additional +10% whenever experience points are earned.

CHAPTER THREE

Guidance



"Books! I've read several on the subject."

Daylight.

I had never seen the sun before, and it was fair to say I still hadn't. But the power of its light filtered down through the thick angry, cloud cover, turning a sickly color yet still brighter and warmer than the humming lights of Stable Two. The air itself looked somehow wrong in the light, off-color. But everything was illuminated. I could see motes of dust and ash floating about the room (I wondered how healthy it was to be breathing it), and for the first time I really grasped the expanse of the outside.

It made me want to hide under the window.

While working up the nerve to step into the (very, very *big*) outdoors, I preoccupied myself with opening the locked chest I had discovered the night before. It took two of my bobby pins, but it was worth it! Inside was the most beautiful dress I had ever seen! Such lines, such folds of fabric, and the *colors* – elegant and regal – yet the fabric was light, breezy and did not sag! It was a dream! Sadly, a dream for another, taller pony.

Joy and disappointment mixed in equal measure. But even if I could not wear it (at least not without some major tailoring), it was the prettiest and most cheerful thing I had seen since leaving the Stable. Carefully folding it up, I slipped it into my saddlebags.

Mindful of the sniper pony from the night before, I stood back, behind the cover of an overturned table, and used my magic to open the door. A tarnished bell hanging above tinkled cheerfully. Muted sunlight poured in. The sounds of outside flowed into the room. The twitter of birds, the far away sloshing of the river. Fresher air pushed back the stale.

Cautiously, I moved into the doorway and looked about. Post-apocalyptic Ponyville was a rotting skeleton of a once homey little town. Between collapsed buildings and burned homes, the streets were littered with rubble and refuse. And everywhere, garish paints of depravity and grotesquery. The graffiti was not limited to outside; the raiders had defaced the Carousel Boutique with an almost ecstatic fervor. I turned from the doorway, my gaze following the lines of profanity that curled up the walls towards the rafters. And shrank back, choking in revulsion at what the sunlight revealed above me – dozens of dead and desiccated cats had been hung from the ceiling like decorations. I had slept directly beneath three of them.

I took an involuntary step back, one hindhoof out the door.

BEEP.

What was that?

BEEP.

I turned and spied the half-buried orange disk in the ground just outside the door. A little red light was pulsing on it. BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

"CLOSE THE DOOR!" The voice came out of nowhere, tinny and mechanical but somehow full of urgency. My heart lurched and I jumped back inside, slamming the door hard.

The explosion just outside tore the door off its frame, hurling it and me back into the room! I crashed through a tattered vanity divider, the smoking door landing over me. "Ugh!!"

I was more shocked than hurt as I slowly dragged myself out from under the door. My ears were ringing. A trap. No wonder the raider ponies hadn't invaded while I slept. They had left a present instead.

"Hurry. There are more on the way." I could barely make out the voice; my ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton candy.

"Who are you?" I queried, but moved to throw my canteens over my neck while magically drawing out the combat shotgun. I had been dismayed to learn that it had only had one shot left; but if a raider pony stepped through the door, I intended to make it count.

An entirely different voice replied. "Come out, come out, whoever you are!" The head of a raider pony slid into the doorway, grinning maniacally with something in her teeth. It looked like a metal apple. She tossed her head, it flew into the room at me, but the stem stayed behind in her teeth.

A memory flashed through my mind: I as a younger pony, trotting to the Stable schoolroom when an older pony stepped out of a doorway and heaved a water balloon at me. It had burst against my horn, soaking me and my homework. "Hey, don't look so sad, blankflanks! I was just tryin' ta help you. Y'know, in case your cutie mark is supposed to be a target!" The older pony had laughed and hurried off to class, leaving me dripping and miserable in the hall.

Lesson learned: when somepony throws something at you, don't let it hit you. Don't even let it hit near you, because it might splash. The combat shotgun clattered to the floor as I focused my magic on the metal apple, catching it and hurling it back out the door. The grenade barely cleared the doorframe when it exploded. Dust and splinters of wood few at me, getting in my eyes. A tinkling erupted at my feet. Looking down, blinking the debris from my eyes, I saw the little bell from over the door had landed, mangled, at my hooves.

My eyes hurt, and I kept blinking to clear them. Cautiously, lifting the combat shotgun again, I edged towards the door. I could barely see the foreleg of the raider pony around the edge of the door frame, completely still. With a second thought, I levitated the table so that it formed a barricade over the lower half of the doorway, and crawled up behind it. Quickly popping my head up, I looked to see if the raider pony was still conscious.

The leg wasn't attached to the rest of the pony.

It took me a moment to spot the rest of her torn body, mercifully dead. I dropped back under cover, feeling a strangeness pass over me. I had just *killed* somepony!

* * *

Sneaking out of Ponyville had been harrowing.

I realized early that I had been neglecting my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. Once I had brought up my E.F.S., it was far easier to determine where the raider ponies were, and to avoid them. Despite actively looking for me, the raider ponies proved less than adept hunters. Using my magic to bang a mailbox lid down the street or break an empty bottle against a freestanding chimney several yards away provided sufficient distraction to get past them. I had almost made past the last house when the sniper pony started taking shots at me again. The closest shot grazed my flank – a slash of burning pain and a flowing blood. Fortunately, the wound looked far worse than it was, and even my meager medical skills were enough to stop the bleeding and bandage it.

I crouched in a little gully, sheltered by trees, and fought to catch my breath. Somewhere in the distance, I heard music playing again. The rumble from my stomach was much louder, reminding me that I hadn't eaten in almost a day. I floated out one of the apples from my saddlebags while I un-corked one of my canteens. Of course, I had no more than taken a sip when my PipBuck threw a dancing red light into my E.F.S. compass. Not coming from the raider town, but from up ahead, deeper into the hilly wood. Of course. Something else was coming to get me. Because the wasteland clearly hated me.

I re-corked the canteen and stood up, wincing at the flair of heat in my wounded flank. I lifted the combat shotgun, still with its single shot, and perked my ears to listen.

My surroundings were quiet. Even the music was gone. Then I started to make out a faint buzzing. I lifted the gun to eye-level and focused down the top of the barrel, lining it up with warning mark of red on my E.F.S. At first, I saw nothing. Then I spotted it, an ugly little flying creature, bloated and grotesque, hovering between the trees. It spotted me too, and shot a spiny dart through the air at me. It missed me (mostly, getting tangled in my mane).

I aimed, but hesitated. The damn thing was so small, and could jerk about so erratically, that I had almost no chance of hitting it. I didn't dare waste my only shot. So I did the next best thing. I dodged behind a tree and prepared to gallop.

Another mark appeared on my E.F.S. followed by a zortching, crackling sound quite unlike anything I'd heard before. The red light winked out, leaving only the new one, which my PipBuck had divined as "friendly".

"I'm really sorry about what happened back in Ponyville. But that raider didn't give you any choice. She would have killed you." It was that same mechanical, tinny voice that had shouted out the warning that surely saved my life earlier.

With a mixture of relief and bewilderment, I watched the sprite-bot fly up to my hiding place.

"Who are you?" ('What are you?' was the question that wanted to escape my muzzle, but I suspected it would be rude.)

"A friend." I raised an eyebrow. "Okay, a passing acquaintance. But one that doesn't mean you any harm." After a pregnant pause, "Call me Watcher."

I regarded the sprite-bot critically. "Watcher. Okay…" I slipped out from behind the tree and started looking for where my apply had rolled to when I dropped it. Not far away, near where the flying creature had been, I spotted a glowing pile of pink ash. "You do that?"

"Bloatsprites. That's what you get when you mix parasprites with Taint. Can't stand 'em, myself. Glad to help."

Finding my apple, I levitated it up. "Thank you. And thank you for the warning about that… thing in the ground."

"Mine."

I blinked. "Y-you want my apple?"

The sprite-bot laughed, which was very weird to hear since the artificial voice didn't have any inflection. "No. That's what it was called. The explosive in the ground. It's called a mine. It triggers when you step close."

"Oh." I took a bite of the apple. "That's a very stupid name for a weapon."

The sprite-bot laughed again. It was a little unnerving. Then, strangely, I found myself chuckling as well. "I really thought you meant my apple was yours. I'd share it if you wanted, although I don't know what you'd do with it since you can't eat."

"Huh?" For having no emotion in its voice, the sprite-bot did a good job at conveying confusion.

"You don't eat. Food. Because you are a robot, and you don't have a mouth."

A third time with the laughter, although this was more of a slight chuckle. "Oh! You mean the sprite-bot." Well, at least I wasn't the only one this conversation had managed to confuse, although I was more confused now than ever. "The sprite-bot isn't actually me. I'm somewhere else; I just learned how to hack into these things to communicate. And look around."

I was beginning to get the picture. "Then that music…"

"Oh gosh no. I turn that crap off the moment I hack into one of these. You have no idea how *old* that music gets." As an afterthought, the hacker-in-the-sprite-bot added, "Yet."

I finished my apple. My stomach felt much better now. As did my spirits, thanks to finally having a civilized (if utterly bizarre) conversation.

"Oh, time's almost up. Look, there are a few things you're going to need if you want to survive out here. A weapon (or at least a lot more ammo for the one you have), armored barding, a bit of guidance… and most importantly, you need to make some friends."

Armor, at lest, shouldn't be too hard, although I shuddered hard at the thought of putting on a dead pony's barding. Still, that grazing shot… I'd been outside less than a full day and already I'd come terrifyingly close to death. I could probably slip back around to the bridge and strip it off the corpses there.

A weapon? If the idea of stripping armor from the dead made me cringe, the idea of possibly killing again stopped my heart. And friends? I'd had no luck with that as a foal in the Stable. What chance did I have in a world where saving a pony from raiders and slavery didn't get you a friendship welcome mat? If this was what I needed to do to survive, I wasn't sure I was up to the task.

"What do you mean by guidance?"

The bobbing sprite-bot was silent a moment. "I'm going to take a shot in the dark here and guess you like books. Am I right?"

"Well, yes. I…"

"There's a great book for people traveling through the Equestrian Wasteland. I'm pretty sure there's a copy in the Ponyville Library. Give me just a second… Okay, I've sent the tag for it to your PipBuck."

My eyes widened in alarm. "The *Ponyville* Library. You mean, that place I just barely escaped from? The town full of sick, psycho ponies? Are you trying to get me killed?"

"Look, you've got to trust somebody."

The memory of Monterey Jack surfaced in my mind. "Why should I trust you? I've never even met you. You're hiding behind a robot radio."

"Oh, I dunno. How about the me-saving-your-life part? If I was trying to kill you, why would I have done that?"

The voice, Watcher, had a point. Before I could say anything to that effect however, the sprite-bot burped static and began playing music again. (The music featured multiple harmonicas and trombones.) It flew lazily away, as if it didn't care I was there.

* * *

The Ponyville Library was in a tree. Not a treehouse, but literally *inside a tree.* A massive, gnarled tree bigger than most buildings had been grown in the middle of the town, clearly the project of magic, and hollowed out to be the public library. The south side of the tree was scorched black and dead. But there were still a few leaves clinging to life on the opposite branches. The tree was surrounded by a wide open space with absolutely no cover.

Any hope my luck at the Carousel Boutique would hold out here was dashed when I looked up to the highest balcony and finally spotted the sniper pony – an earth pony armed with a powerful-looking rifle. The rifle was attached to the balcony railing with a gliding swivel mount, allowing the raider to aim it wherever she could see. The only safe approach was from directly behind her, where the door to the balcony and the narrow top of the tree beyond blocked her line of sight. There were surely more raider ponies inside.

Sneaking up carefully from the only direction that wouldn't mean instant death, I was trembling with nerves by the time I reached the door. As swiftly and silently as I could, I slipped out of Ponyville… and straight into pony hell!

Pony corpses everywhere! Not like the bridge where ponies had fallen in battle; these ponies had been mutilated, desecrated and put on display! Some poor pony's body hung from the ceiling, head and hooves severed and flesh sliced open and pulled back to reveal the meat and bones beneath. Heads and limbs hung from chains like sick party decorations. The rotting body of a pink pony with a violent mane was mounted, spread-eagled over a bookcase with railroad spikes. Two had been driven into her eyes. On another wall, a torso had been skinned and sliced open, the pony's entrails pulled out to decorate the shelves like streamers.

Blood and gore were everywhere, dripping from the ceiling and painting the walls in equal parts with the graffiti that had somehow gotten even more mocking and cruel. Between the bookcases, pre-war posters were mounted in shattered frames. Some raider pony had painted over one of them ("Reading is Magic") with a crude but effective depiction of a megaspell detonation. Another ("The most beautiful ponies have beautiful minds!") was covered over by a painting that was simply pornographic. The books had been burned in piles. The floor was layered in ash and filth. The stench was *unbearable.*

The room was dominated by three cages, two large square ones, and a smaller one hanging from the ceiling which was barely big enough for a pony. Captives – filthy, beaten and misused – were curled up inside, their hooves tied together with stained ropes. The two in the nearest cage looked at me pitifully and my heart wrenched painfully.

My eyes kept going wider until I had to clench them shut and bite my own hoof to keep from screaming. I backed against the door, heaving, unable to breathe properly, not wanting to breathe this air at all! The horror of the room flooded over me, drowning me. I pulled my hoof away barely fast enough to avoid vomiting my apple all over myself. The stench of it mixed with the reek of the room, assaulting me further.

"please," a whisper from one of the ponies, terrified to raise her voice, "help us."

This was beyond horror! I pressed my eyes tighter and tighter… then opened them as a wave of brutal determination cut through the sickness.

"please… help!"

That was no voice, disembodied and trapped in an eternal loop, coming from some radio signal floating through the ether. These were living ponies; they were right here in front of me, and they needed help. And I was as damned as these rotten raiders if I was going to make them beg again.

The screwdriver and bobby pin slipped out and immediately began working on the nearest lock. With a click, the metal cage door swung open. Inside, two ponies, bound and laying in their own filth. I realized uncomfortably that I had nothing to cut the ropes with. I tried to untie them with my magic, the first pony's ropes were so wet with blood that I could pull them apart, but second pony's were bound too tightly.

"Are… are you for real?" The first pony stood shakily. "I-I'm free?"

I nodded, then glanced to the other ponies. I had no idea how I'd reach the one in the hanging cage. "If you could help me with…"

The pony blanched and shook her mane. "Oh no, I can't stay here any longer. But, here, take these supplies. I managed to squirrel them away…" The pony dug into the floor muck with her hoof, revealing the utterly pathetic pile of scraps laying on a dirty rag that amounted to her entire worldly possessions. A can of diced carrots, a box of pre-war single-serve cake, a handful of bottle caps. It broke my heart.

"No, you keep it. You'll need it more…" I paused, my eye catching a single shotgun shell in the pile. "Actually, I'll take this shell. Thanks!" I magically opened the shotgun and slid it into place. Now I had two.

The pony had already folded up the rag, picked it up in her teeth and slinked rapidly out the door before I could say anything else. I sent up a prayer to Celestia for her and focused on saving the others. I looked over the second pony, who hadn't said a word, and recoiled as I saw the blood caking the inside of her flanks. What had these raiders *done!?!*

Looking around, I took in the shape of the room, trying to blot out the horrors everywhere I turned. (Above the front door was an aged fresco of a beautiful white winged unicorn – Celestia? – unusually large and graceful, a book floating in front of her, her wings outstretched over a rainbow of foals as they smiled up and listened to storytime. Not only had the ponies been painted over with images of blood and knives and violence, the fresco had been used for target practice, everything from bullets to flung excrement, and was now shattered and stained unspeakably.) The room was oddly shaped, with balconies and rooms branching (literally) off in all directions. I could hear the voices of raider ponies in the other rooms. And, judging from the décor, knives wouldn't be far behind.

"I'll be right back," I promised with a whisper. Then, levitating the combat shotgun, I moved towards the nearest interior door.

I jumped back as the door swung open at me. A raider pony stepped through and stopped, staring at me blankly. His coat was dark black under his makeshift armor, his mane wild. Holsters were strapped to his flanks, one with a small gun, the other holding a blade whose edge was jagged like a saw, ensuring the most grievous of wounds. In stark, horrified disbelief, I saw that his cutie mark was actually a splayed torso.

The raider pony recovered quickly, swinging his head around and drawing out the small gun in his teeth (what, was he going to pull the trigger with his tongue?) just before S.A.T.S. helped me pump my two shotgun rounds into his face. I felt no remorse as his head turned into spaghetti sauce that splattered over his instantly lifeless body. I hadn't just killed a pony – these raiders had given up any right to the title! These were not ponies, they were sick monsters that needed to be put down! And Celestia help me if I wasn't going to do just that. I didn't realize it until that moment, but I was *mad!* The pure evil of this place had shaken me to the core… and my core was *furious!*

Collecting knife and gun, I dropped the empty combat shotgun to the side. The smaller weapon was not going to be as powerful, but was fully loaded – six shots in a revolving barrel. And that was good, because there was no way the noise wasn't going to bring every raider pony running.

The first three raider ponies galloped into the main library almost immediately, one of them crying out thrilled insults. S.A.T.S. helped me fire three shots at her head. The first two missed, but the third found a home in one of her ugly red eyes and down she went. A second started firing another small firearm at me (what do you know, they *do* shoot with their tongues!), bullets impacting the door frame. One shot punctured one of my saddlebags, but didn't pierce flesh.

I crouched and poked my head around, levitating the revolver in the open doorway. I fired two shots at the second pony, but my PipBuck's targeting spell was refreshing, and without it I might as well have been aiming at the ceiling. Still, the gunslinger raider skittered away, using one of the captive ponies for cover. The dishonorableness poured gasoline on the fire of my anger. I stepped fully into the doorway, looking for the third, spotting him on the far end of the main room.

The third raider pony lowered his head, a pool cue clenched in his teeth, and charged at me.

I blinked. "Really?" I took a single step back. The pony rushed at me full-tilt, and was nearly on me when the ends of the pool cue struck the doorway, snapping him to a stop. I fired the revolver's last shot point-blank into his neck. Even I didn't need S.A.T.S. at that range.

"Shouldn't you ponies be smarter than that? You live in a library!"

As the body slumped to the floor, bleeding from the gaping wound through it's neck, I saw the gun-wielding raider standing in the open, aiming through the door. I dived to the side as shots rang out, and screamed as I felt a bullet sink into my side. It hurt! More than I had thought it would.

I fell against the wall, leaving a bloody smear as I collapsed next to the doorway. Pain seared my side, flaring with each breath. I could hear the clop of the raider's hooves as he approached cautiously. I tried to focus my magic to close the door, but the body of pool-cue pony was in the way.

I cast about the room. It was a kitchen. On a table, surrounded by knives, was the body of a fearsome creature of scales and teeth. The raider pony with the splayed torso cutie mark had been carving it up to cook. A refrigerator. And oven. There were scattered books, but all ancient, destroyed and unreadable. (I was beginning to doubt the Watcher's assertion that there was a book here like he described.) Then my eyes fell on what I was hoping for. In one corner, mounted on the wall over several metal boxes of ammunition, was a faded yellow box with a pink butterfly symbol on it: a medical box! Double luck: the box looked to be locked. There were knife-scrapes all over it where the raiders had attempted to get it open. It should still have a few medical poultices, and maybe even a healing potion!

But I had to survive the raider pony first, and I was wounded and out of bullets. Crossing to the ammo boxes would mean moving across the open doorway. Scooting back, I looked around again. And focused my magic through the pain.

When the raider pony stepped in, he was met by a swarm of knives flying at his face. "Gah!!" He turned and fled back out. The knives all either missed or struck uselessly against his armor. I was even more pathetic with melee weapons than I was with guns. But it got him out of the way long enough to make for the ammo boxes. Luck was with me again. While one box had ammo in large clips for a type of gun I had yet to see, the other had bullets designed for the revolver.

The raider poked his head around again, calling out "You're all out of knives, missy! Why don't you just come on out. I promise I'll let you die, eventually."

His head turned in my direction his eyes went wide. I don't know if it was the look in my eyes or the revolver. S.A.T.S. was with me again, and this bastard wasn't going to get another chance to use raped and beaten captive as a shield.

* * *

One more dead raider, a picked medical box and a healing potion later, I trotted quietly back into the main room, serrated knife floating by my side. I moved to the open cage and sawed away the ropes binding the poor pony. "Go. You're free. Get somewhere safe."

With a blink, I remembered the sniper pony, and quickly told her which direction to sneak away in. She nodded mutely and began to slink out. I moved to the next cage.

What I saw sickened me. A pony had been locked inside along with a decaying corpse. The pony was whimpering in her sleep, and had her tail wrapped around the ghastly body like a teddy ursa.

Unlike the other bodies, I couldn't tell how this one had died, for it wasn't carved apart. The body had lost all its coat, it's skin was a sickening blotch-work of red and grey, flaking away. Its eyes were open, dry and staring in wrong directions. Its teeth were horribly yellowed, matching the few strands of hair left in its mane and tail. Odd, fleshy growths hung from its sides. At first, I mistook them for mutations, but then I realized I was looking at the pony's wings! This was the body of a pegasus pony. Stripped of feathers and hair, the wings looked strange, even repulsive.

I screamed, a full-throated cry of terror, when the corpse shifted position and sat up, it's eyes sliding around until they both focused on me. It was a zombiepony!

The zombiepony blinked at me, then tried to get up, only to fall over onto one winged side as it's hooves were bound in ropes like the others. It… she stared at me plaintively.

My mind was reeling. Of the scattered half-thoughts that flitted through my brain, "untie the nice zombie so she doesn't get mad at me" managed to be the most coherent, if not the most sane.

Swallowing, I moved the knife down to her ropes. "Hold still." I looked at her eyes and was quickly forced to look away. One of them was sliding again. Her breath was fetid. "Now if I let you go, and you try to eat my brains, we're going to have harsh words."

⁂

I had freed the second two captives, including the zombie-pony, both of whom slipped away without an offer to help (although the zombie at least smiled at me, which was… deeply unpleasant), and was trying to figure out how to get to the hanging cage when two more raider ponies appeared on a balcony above. One of them was a unicorn pony with a very scary-looking firearm. I dove into the shelter of a stairwell as the raider opened fire. The gun let out a terrifying cacophony of rapid-fire cracks as it sprayed the main room with bullets.

At least I knew what type of gun the large clips were for now.

I waited until I heard him reloading, then dashed into the room and spun to face him, focusing all my magic… not on my own weapon nor on him, but on the bookshelf behind him. The glow of my horn stood out brighter and brighter as he lifted the reloaded assault rifle and took aim for my head.

CRASH!

The bookshelf came down on top of him, knocking him unconscious. The assault rifle fell to the floor in a rain of dead books. Something else showered down as well, thrown from the falling bookshelf. Knocking away a book that had fallen over it, I saw that it was an ancient, dusty pair of pre-war binoculars. At first, it struck me as extremely odd that someone would need binoculars in a library – that would require some *really* bad eyesight – but the silly thought passed.

I couldn't see where the other raider pony had gotten to. Swiftly, I added the assault rifle to my growing collection, and the binoculars for good measure. Then I looked back to the balcony, considering it as a way to get to the cage pony hanging from the ceiling. If I could get up there, I thought, I could leap from it to the cage. That would get me close enough that I could see what I was doing while I picked the lock.

The second raider pony appeared back at the railing, a wicked grin on his face. With a hoof, he shoved forward an ammo box, then tilted it over. The lid sprung open and half a dozen orange disks poured out into the library below.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

Oh fuck!

I dashed as fast as my little legs could take me, leaping over the body of pool-cue pony and under the kitchen table, using my magic to toss it over as a shield. The carved-up radigator slid to the floor with a meaty thump.

Behind my shield, the world became blinding light and fire!

* * *

When I emerged, the main room was a wreck. Fresh blood dripped down into my mane. Looking up, I saw the blast-torn remains of the pony in its twisted metal cage. Oh, Celestia damn them to hell!

More determined than ever, I stripped the raider bodies (what little was left of them now) of their armors. The armors were in shredded tatters, but with some effort I was able to use the best parts of each to patch together something that would give me better protection than my stable-issued utility barding. The resulting outfit had almost no pockets, so I would have to dig the utility suit out of my saddlebags to get at most of my tools, but it was a fair trade.

Putting it on was gruesome. My hooves were darkened with blood just from working on it; every inch was covered in the flash-fried gore of dead ponies. I almost lost my nerve and abandoned the awful thing. I slipped it on; my stomach rebelled, but I didn't have any more to throw up.

A last look around while I figured I still had time. The raider above obviously assumed I was dead. (I would have assumed I was dead too.) Looting the bodies garnered me a little more ammo. The gun from the earlier raider had been in bad shape to begin with, and was damaged beyond repair by the explosion. Several ponies apparently collected bottle caps, which struck me as an absurdly odd thing to horde. I left those alone. The kitchen's refrigerator had a small stockpile of food: cooked radigator meat, a few skewers of barbecued fruits and what the PipBuck identified as bloatsprite meat, a box of pre-war cake (because nothing says healthy eating like two-hundred-year-old food) and some water that looked like it was bottled straight out of sludge river. I took everything but the cake and water; apparently, splayed-torso cutie raider was a rather decent cook. With a second thought, I looked over the ingredients on the cake box (filled with enough preservatives that your stomach will still be intact long after the rest of you rotted away to dust!) and took it too.

The raider pony was in the main room, looking over his handiwork, when I returned from the kitchen. One look at me (and my growing pile of weaponry) and he fled up the stairs. I galloped after him, revolver zipping through the air in a cloud of levitation magic that matched the light around my horn.

He went through a door on the level above. It took me only a moment to reach it, but caution made me skid to a stop before barreling through. If that had been me on the other side, I'd be waiting just to the side of the door, ready to take the head off of the raider who rushed through. With positions reversed, I was not going to make the same mistake.

A filly's cry from inside, "aaah! Help!" changed the scenario.

Standing to the side, I threw open the door. When there was no attack, I darted in. And stopped short.

The room was lined with more destroyed books on either side, and ended in a large window that opened onto a balcony. This room was decorated as disgustingly as the last, but filled with stained sleeping mattresses. Near the open window, a filly too young to even have her cutie mark lay on a mattress stained with so much blood it was nearly black. She had been brutalized and raped repeatedly, and her flank was covered in small burns where her cutie mark would have eventually appeared.

Her ropes were on the floor nearby, looking chewed through. And between myself and her, the raider pony stood with a shocking hostage: the zombie-pony! It took me a moment to realize she must have flown in from the balcony; and (if I was allowed to believe there was any decency left in the world) it would have been her who gnawed the filly's ropes free. Now, she was against a wall, with the blade of an axe to her throat.

A small part of my brain insisted on distracting me by wondering how the zombie-pony could have flown when her wings didn't have any feathers. As if that was a more significant mystery than how she could be alive (by some definition) in her decayed physical condition.

My distraction was distracted by a nearby table. An ashtray with a smoking cigar told me just how the filly had gotten those burns. Rage welled up in me until I felt it would burst through my eyeballs. Next to the ashtray, two familiar metal apples rested on top of an (only lightly stained) book with a stylized pony skull on the cover. A second book, this one showing a revolver almost identical to the one floating next to me, had slipped to the floor where it rested against one leg of the table, along with several pencils and a filly's lunch box. A smiling, gentle white unicorn with a beautiful lavender and pink mane stared back beneath the Stable-Tec logo. It felt wrong that something so innocent-looking should be in this place.

My eyes turned to the earth pony raider with the axe in his teeth. For a moment I just hated at him, the room quiet except for the filly's occasional whimpers.

When my voice returned, my words surprised me. "By Celestia, you're stupid. Hard to tell a pony to back off, or surrender, when your mouth is full of axe, isn't it? Maybe if you spent some more time reading these books rather than destroying them, you'd be smart enough to come up with a plan that actually allowed you to negotiate a way out of this."

The grenades levitated off the table; I dangled them between us. “One that doesn’t end with me shoving one of these up your tailhole!”

The raider pressed the axe blade tighter against the zombie-pony’s throat, enough to cut flesh, which split and pulled back as if it had been strained taut. Ichor that might have once been blood oozed from the wound. The zombie-pony didn’t flinch or whimper, but the filly did both.

“Right. Kill her.” The revolver floated forward next to the grenades. “That way, there won’t be anything to block my shot.”

I could see the raider considering his options and not liking what he was finding. Dropping the axe from his mouth, he whinnied pathetically “I don’t wanna die!” and dashed for the open balcony, leaping over the cringing filly.

S.A.T.S. send four shots right into his ass. It was a pathetic way to die.

Looking to the filly and the zombie-pony, I smiled grimly. “There’s one left. I’ll be right back.”

I turned and continued up the stairs toward the upper balcony and the sniper pony.

⁂

Better equipped and a lot more confident, my heart still flickering with righteous fire, I made my way carefully out of Ponyville.

Up ahead, I spotted a huge gazebo surrounding a marble statue of a rearing pony girded with combat barding, a sword in his mouth. The gazebo was relatively free of grafitti… and peeking through the binoculars, I could see why. The field of weeds around it were teaming with radigators. My E.F.S. was filling with red marks as I drew closer.

Slipping out my newly acquired sniper rifle, I picked off a few. Their meat, I knew now, was safe when cooked (at least, relative to other food source in the Equestrian Wasteland). Slipping the sniper rifle back into its harness (another “gift” from the sniper pony), I slid out the serrated knife and crouched up towards my kill.

An alert flashed on my PipBuck. Checking it, I discovered that it had labeled the gazebo in front of me: The Macintosh War Memorial.

Curiosity pulled me closer. Careful of radigators, I neared enough to read the inscription beneath the statue through my binoculars.

“In honor of Big Macintosh, hero of the Battle of Shattered Hoof Ridge, and his noble sacrifice for all of Equestria.”

As I lowered the binoculars, I caught sight of something else. A concrete circle sticking up from the ground, roughly halfway between myself and the gazebo, with a ponyhole cover. Remembering the night before, I turned my PipBuck back to the first radio broadcast on the list.

> *“…from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he’s terribly sick. Too sick to move. We’ve holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We’re running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us… Message repeats…”*

Pulling out the revolver, wary of radigators, I crept towards the cistern opening. I was almost there before one of the beasts charged at me, its huge maw opening to reveal rows on rows of razor-sharp teeth. I fired twice into its mouth. Horrifyingly, that wasn’t enough to kill it. But it did make the beast think twice. The sound, however, brought more of them down on me. Abandoning the revolver in fright, I used my magic to pull open the ponyhole and dived in, sliding the cover over behind me.

* * *

In the wake of my anger, I was exhausted. In the aftermath of the library battle, my whole body ached from exertion. My nerves felt frayed from the content adrenaline. Eating a bloatsprite skewer, I looked over the small underground chamber once more before curling up on the upper bunk of the pair of bunk beds built into the wall. I tried not to think of the colt skeleton on the bed below me. The skeleton of his father was by the door. A sip from my canteen took the edge off my thirst. It was almost empty; I had to conserve.

I reflected how, when I had come back downstairs after dealing with the sniper pony, the zombie-pony was already gone, and had taken the poor filly with her. I hoped it was to someplace safe. I found it strange that the most decent pony I had found in the wasteland was already sort of dead. I also noticed that the assault rifle pony was also gone; he had woken up and freed himself from the crushing bookshelf. That meant there was at least one more raider still in the wastes, but I wasn't the sort of pony to kill somepony while they slept. Not even a raider.

I figured that if I slept here tonight, that would give the radigators time to wander away from the exit. If I was lucky, I would even spot where I dropped the revolver.

Until then, I would preoccupy myself with my two new books. Slipping them out of my saddlebags, I looked the first one over, the one with my lost revolver on the cover. Guns and Bullets. Very straightforward. I set it aside for now.

The second book, a grey tome with a black pony skull on the cover, was the real prize. Opening it to the first page, I began to read:

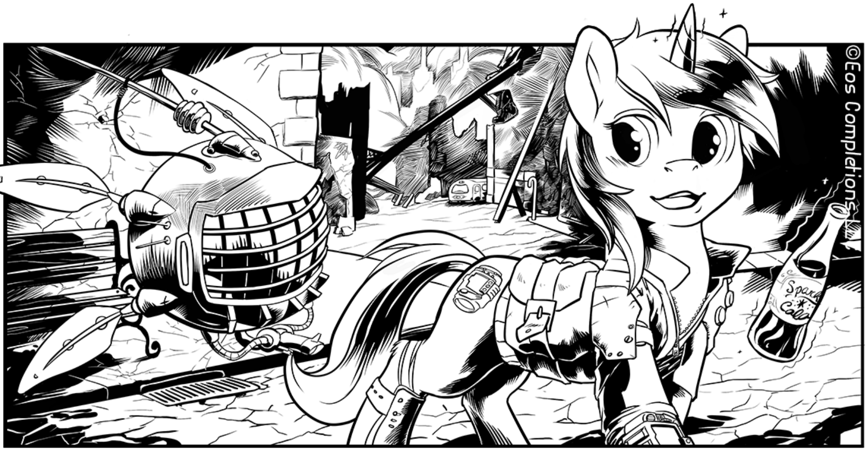
"The Wasteland Survival Guide. By Ditzy Doo…"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Bookworm – You pay much closer attention to the smaller details when reading. You gain 50% more skill points when reading books.

Chapter Four

Perspective



"I don't know why it took an interest in you, but I'd be careful. It's never helped anyone before."

Stupid!

A blast of lightning fired past me, shattering an old clock at the back of the overview office I was cowering in. The Wasteland Survival Guide was full of all sorts of helpful tips. Scavenging guides. A whole chapter on mines. And more! And then there were the not-so-helpful ones. After having read the chapter on "Making Pre-War Earth Pony Technology Work For You", my first thought when I came across the ruins of Ironshod Firearms was to take a peek inside and see if there was any technology I could make work for me.

Instead, I got myself trapped in a maze full of ponicidal robots and automated turrets, fleeing until I managed to back myself into a corner here in an office box high above the factory floor. Almost out of ammo. If I hadn't found that medical box in the employee bathroom, I would have died trying to get across the second floor.

How could I possibly have been so very stupid?

Below, three of those robots were rolling about, looking for me. They were tracked things, built to somewhat resemble ponies, with clear domed heads that housed real brains. I refused to think that the ponies who built them might have used other ponies' brains in the construction. The thought was just too horrible. Even doing that to an animal's brain was awful. And clearly, two-hundred years of continuous operation had done nothing for their sanity.

"Come on out. We only want to kill you for trespassing!"

Case in point.

The fact that the voice sounded like a young filly, despite being clearly artificial, just made them that much freakier. Fortunately, the railing on the catwalks leading up to this office were too narrow for the brain-bots to get up here.

A much deeper, authoritative voice boomed across the room. *"Surrender in the name of the Ministry of Technology, zebra scum!"*

I cringed behind a line of metal filing cabinets as the room filled with a rush of flame!

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the other type of guard robot I'd crossed paths with in here. The multi-limbed things looked like giant metal spiders, many of its arms seemed to end in weapons, including a buzzsaw and a flamethrower. And worse, the damn things could fly!

I slipped both of my grenades out of my saddlebags and waited until the flames died away. The metal cabinets were beginning to get unpleasantly warm against my back, and the heat in the air seared my lungs. The second the flamethrower cut off, I turned my head around the corner and levitated them both right up to the metal monster, pulling out the stems on the way. The moment it saw me, the robot raised a pulsing green weapon that looked like a unicorn's horn. Eldritch fire erupted from it, shooting past me close enough to singe my cheek. The blast struck an old fan sitting on the desk behind me; it glowed green for a moment, then melted! I ducked back as I dropped the grenades.

The explosion rocked the office. I heard a fearsome twang as part of the catwalk outside gave. Looking back, the robot was in a non-functional heap. The walkway outside was still mostly intact, but sagging badly. I wasn't sure it could hold my weight.

Stripping what I could from the fallen spider-bot, I considered my options. I couldn't stay up here forever. If I moved very fast, I could run the walkway without the brain-bots below getting me. Their weaponry did not seem very accurate. But the first few yards of the catwalk had partially torn free, and sagged alarmingly. The more I looked at it, the less I wanted to put a hoof on it.

I'd never tried levitating *myself* before. In theory, it should work, but I'd never seen a pony do it. Focusing, I tried. I could feel the glow from my horn stretch out to envelop my entire body. Brighter it glowed as I tried to lift myself. I was shining like a dozen lanterns when I felt my body lift, just slightly, from the ground. I was sweating. This was as far as I could go, but I was doing it. Now one step forward… and another… and another…

I was halfway across when the brain-bots started firing lightning in my general direction. One of the bolts struck the catwalk, arcing along it. I felt very lucky I wasn't actually touching it. But I was also almost spent. Ahead of me, the catwalk stopped right before the huge windows that let twice-filtered sunlight (once by the clouds and once by the dirty glass itself) onto the factory floor, supplementing the light from heavy fixtures hanging above. The catwalk shot off in both directions, running parallel to the wall. One was the direction I had come from. The other lead to a door which had been locked. Only that door didn't have a lock to pick. Instead, it could only be opened by command from a terminal.

Another shot of lightning missed cleanly, shooting through one of the shattered windows of the observation office and frying the terminal I had just used, not five minutes ago, to unlock said door.

It was a lot of metal catwalk. And the damn bots beneath me shot lightning. I grunted with the effort that kept me aloft, feeling my vision darken at the edges. I had to stop, or I'd pass out. And that would be the end of me.

Releasing the magic, I dropped onto the catwalk. It wavered, but held. I let go of a breath I didn't realize I was holding, and started to gallop.

"Don't run! We want to be your friend!"

More blasts. I tensed, expecting to feel paralyzing electricity rip up my body, starting at my hooves. Instead, I heard a crash a loud pop and a twang from somewhere above. Looking up as I ran, I saw that one of the bolts had hit the hanging lamp above, causing its softly buzzing light to explode. And that, freakishly, was the last straw: it snapped loose from the badly aged, cracked ceiling above and swung down, crashing into the catwalk behind me. The whole walkway shook. And then the section behind me tore away with a rending scream of abused metal.

Oh fuck me with Celestia's forehooves!

I'll admit, my repertoire of colorful descriptions had grown more profane from my experience with the raiders; but as I galloped down the walkways at heart-tearing speed, trying to keep ahead as the sections of catwalk began to fall down onto the factory floor like a thunderous, lethal game of dominos, I felt the sentiment entirely appropriate.

I was almost to the door when the metal walkway dropped out from under me. I threw myself forward, carried only on momentum, and caught the final section with only my forelegs. I hung there, my hindhooves dangling several stories over an ancient rifle assembly line that had been crushed by the fallen catwalk. I struggled, trying to inch myself up. I used my magic to try to tug on my saddlebags and drag myself forward. My heart was pounding. I fought to keep visions of falling from dominating my imagination – tried not to think of my back breaking as I landed on the conveyor belt below. At least the damned brain-bots weren't shooting at me anymore, having scurried for cover.

It seemed to take forever, but inch-by-inch I pulled myself onto that final section of catwalk. It wobbled threateningly beneath me, sticking out from the wall like a diving board, held in place by bolts that wiggled in wear-widened holes. Cautiously, I got my hooves under me and stepped lightly towards the door.

A blast of lightning hit the catwalk, shooting up my legs and sending me into painful convulsions. I collapsed, shaking, on the walkway, my mane and tailhairs standing on end. The walkway responded with a metallic cry and tilted several inches, threatening to dump me into the gulf below.

I struggled shakily to my feet. Another blast shot up from almost directly beneath me, missing the walkway by less than a foot and striking the ceiling above. Bits of singed plaster rained down. I gave the door a push, and was vastly relieved when it swung open. Then the catwalk gave further. I lurched, wrapping my forelegs around the door frame to keep from sliding down the now quite steep metal platform. A third electrical blast ripped through the air, striking another strip of industrial lighting whose light also exploded, making it swing perilously.

Grunting, I pulled myself into the room. I turned and sat in the doorway, looking down at the brain-bot rolling in circles directly below, trying to figure out how to get me. Then, with a strong kick of my forehooves, I knocked the last of the catwalk loose. It fell, scraping down the wall, until it smashed through the robot's brain-case, pulping the organ inside and continuing down, ripping the machine roughly in half. I must admit that I found the crunch immensely satisfying.

I realize that if the room I had successfully accessed at such great personal risk had not offered another way out, I would have been in deep trouble.

Closing the door behind me, I felt immediately more comfortable. The room had been painted in what had once been a bright orange, and the paint had not lost all its warmth over time. The wood paneling probably brought a pleasant, homey feel to what I believed was clearly the factory overmare's office. Now that wood was rotted and crumbling. On the back wall above the desk was an oversized logo in deeply tarnished bronze:

IRONSHOD FIREARMS
How do you like ***them*** *apples?*

I didn't get it.

Ignoring it, I looked around. Large, fancy desk. Chair. Filing cabinets. A poster in a backlit frame – the same poster I had seen several other times in the factory, but this one in better condition, showing graceful pegasus ponies soaring through the sky, rainbows exploding behind them as they shot down on dark, demonic striped figures with evil, glowing eyes. (Better Wiped than Striped! Join the Equestrian Forces Today!) A wardrobe.

My eyes barely touched these, moving to the important things first. The office held a terminal I could hack, a wall safe I could pick, and a personal elevator that, if it worked, would get me safely to the first floor and out of this deathtrap. There was an ammo box under the desk. Then my eyes fell on something unique. Mounted on the opposite wall was a glass case. And in the case was a beautiful and perfectly preserved revolver. A similar model to mine, but crafted with what must have approached love. It had a scope, and an ivory bit molded for extra-comfortable fit in the mouth and ease of trigger. On the handle was an emblem, three apples.

I tried my hoof (so to speak) at the safe first. It was tough, taking a few attempts, but after breaking one bobby pin I learned better how to prevent further losses. The safe opened with a generous click. The impressive amount of objects made me wonder if my excursion into Ironshod Firearms hadn't been worthwhile after all. I started sorting the treasure from the rubbish. Inside was sack full of pre-war coins, a copy of Equestrian Army Today, a whole bunch of finance papers that ceased to mean anything hundreds of years ago, a box of what looked like bubble gum (I couldn't decipher the writing on it), a Spark o' Magic battery and finally an odd hoof-strapped arcano-tech device that looked like it was meant to interface with my PipBuck. Curious, I slid it on and let my PipBuck analyze it.

StealthBuck. Invisiblity Spell. One charge.

Hot damn!

Next was the terminal. Pulling out my utility suit, I slid out my access tool and started to work. This terminal was tougher to crack than the previous ones. Even with my tools, I had to abort several times to avoid getting locked out. I pulled another apple from my bag and bit into it, intent on the screen, only to hit something painfully hard. Levitating the apple up to eye level, I saw a bullet embedded in it. Looking down at my saddlebags, there was indeed a small hole, although it took me a few minutes to remember when that had happened.

Once in, I discovered a whole mess of old notes and messages. In addition, the terminal had a shutdown key for all the robotic security. And it could remotely open both the safe and the display case. I rolled my eyes, thanking the universe ever so much for giving me this potentially life-saving option only now that I'd already fought my way to the finish and no longer needed it. I also realized that I could have saved myself a bobby pin if I had worked on the computer first.

I told the terminal to open the display case. Doing so triggered a message.

> *"Cousin Braeburn, Ah know we ain't talked in some time, but the war effort's takin' a twist for the scary, and Ah might not have a chance t' see ya again. Ah want t' mend fences. Now, Ah ain't gonna muck this up with words. We all know how well that went last time. Instead, Ah'm sendin' ya Lil' Macintosh as a gift and as an apology. T'show you I'm sincere. Keep 'im safe for me, will ya?"*

The accent was very much like that of the voice I found on Velvet Remedy's PipBuck, although this time it was clearly not from the same pony. But it was the earnest tone of the recording that made me pause. Two hundred years ago, some pony had given this gun as a token of apology and as an effort to reconnect with family. And that some pony's cousin had done just as she asked, preserving the weapon for generations after his own death.

I wasn't going to leave it there, untouched by anypony until the building collapsed on it. But when I took it, I removed it respectfully.

All that was left was going through the rest of the office. The ammo box held bullets for *Little Macintosh,* and not a shy amount. In the wardrobe, I found some old maintenance suit that I could use to repair the holes in my own utility barding, and other garments that I left behind.

Eventually, I turned to the elevator and pushed the button. Nothing.

Of course it didn't work. The wasteland just couldn't give me a break. Pulling out my tools, I opened up the side panel and tried to figure out what was wrong and if I could fix it from here.

To my great relief, I could. The elevator proved to be in impressive condition, particularly considering the rest of the building. But the battery for the interface was dead. As Celestia's mercy would have it, there had been a replacement in the safe. One swapping of batteries later, I was on my way. As the doors slid shut, the thought crossed my mind, "Macintosh? Wasn't that…"

◆

I trotted between the collapsed buildings that littered the area around Ironshod Firearms, not having any particular direction to go. Aimless. I hadn't found any signs of civilization… *civilized* civilization, mind you. I had kinda given up on finding Velvet Remedy. For now, I was satisfying myself with random exploration, although that had just proven exceptionally dangerous.

In Stable Two, I knew exactly what my future would be (as unbearably dull as it would have been). Out here, in the huge open outside, I was struggling with just the opposite. I never considered that having an assigned place might be as much a relief as it was a burden.

My ears perked at the sound of overwrought, triumphant music. I watched as a sprite-bot fluttered down a cross street. Running up to it, I drew myself around in front of it. "Watcher?"

It just floated by.

I dashed in front of it again. "Hello?" The music just kept playing. I waved a hoof right in front of its lack of face. It danced around me and kept going.

Well, that was helpful.

I picked a random direction and started trotting again. I thought of Watcher's advice. Armor, check. Weapon, double-check. Guidance? I looked back at the Ironshod building. A bit iffy, but check. Friends?

"It's kinda hard to make friends where there doesn't seem to be anypony around!" My exasperated voice echoed off crumbling walls of concrete. If this was a quest, it was a lame one. I seriously needed to find something to do. Preferably other than "dodge" and "duck". In Stable Two, I felt painfully ordinary. I yearned to be special; now I yearned to be anything.

My downcast eyes chanced upon a Red Rider scooter amidst the ruins. Reaching out a hoof, I flipped it back onto its wheels and prodded it back and forth a few times. Three of the wheels were locked with rust; but to my surprise, one still turned.

Looking up, I found myself at the edge of a playground. The swings and slide jutted into the oddly-colored air, blackened by ancient spellfire, like bones of a great dead beast. The merry-go-round was warped and canted. The skeleton of a baby pony was still curled at one end.

Sadness and immense shame flooded me. I had been feeling sorry for myself in the midst of all this!? Another tiny skeleton lay against the burnt husk of a tree, three roller skates in the dirt near its hooves. The fourth? I doubted anyone would ever know.

I plodded on, moving through the silent impromptu graveyard.

At the far end, sheltered by walls that were mostly still intact, I found an old vending machine. "Sparkle~Cola" the machine still advertised through the years of grime. It featured a backlit emblem of stylized carrots. Surprisingly, the machine still looked functional. Fishing out a few pre-war coins, I fed them into the machine. I didn't actually expect that it would still have soda after all these years. I was astonished when a bottle rolled out dutifully. I suddenly realized how awfully thirsty I was!

The Sparkle~Cola was luke-warm, but actually rather delicious, with a delightfully carroty aftertaste. The clicking of my PipBuck warned me that I was ingesting trace amounts of radiation with each swallow, but not enough to be harmful. I'd taken more harm standing around at Sweet Apple Acres. And besides, if it reached a point where my radiation intake began making me sick, I had a couple RadAway potions – the only supplies from the Ironshod medical box that I hadn't needed to use just to survive the building.

I spotted a bench just around the side of the building and decided to take a load off my legs, possibly read some of the Equestrian Army Today book I had picked up. As I turned the corner, my gaze fell upon an old, torn poster affixed to the wall. The image was the face of an elderly pony of almost obtrusively pink coloration. Her mane was streaked with grey. (On some ponies, grey hair makes them look distinguished; on most, it just makes them look old. Hers made her look like a candy cane.) Her eyes were huge, staring. I could swear, poster or not, that she was looking right into me. Some pony had ripped the poster right through the middle; I had no idea what her expression was supposed to be, but I couldn't help but feel like I was doing something wrong. Bold words above and below the image, now deeply faded, announced: PINKIE PIE IS WATCHING YOU FOREVER! There were additional words, very tiny, beneath, so small and faded that I had to lean close and strain to read them.

"…a happy reminder from the Ministry of Morale." I stepped back, tilting my head as I looked at the poster again. "What's the Ministry of Morale?"

Watcher's voice erupted from over my shoulder, making me jump high enough my horn whacked the ceiling. "Another well-meaning idea that was so much better on scroll."

I gasped, willing my heart to beat regularly again, and felt a fleeting empathy with Sawed-Off. The sprite-bot was hovering right next to me. Celestia, those things were silent when they weren't playing music! "Are you *trying* to give me a heart attack?!"

"Oh. Sorry." I gave the flying orb a glare.

I forgot about the bench and started walking, trying to enjoy the rest of my Sparkle~Cola. The sprite-bot followed.

"I see you've got some armor…" The mechanical voice seemed hesitant. I didn't ask why. Watcher either didn't care enough to explain or thought better of it. Maybe the fact that I was walking through the Equestrian Wasteland in an outfit coated inside and out with drying blood gave it pause.

I could probably go up to any Stable pony and go "I am evil, bad, nightmare pony. Arrrr!" and, even despite my size, they would take one look and flee.

I sipped my cola and wished desperately for someplace decent to bathe. Problem was, any water clean and radiation-free enough to take a bath in would be too precious to pollute. One of my canteens was empty and the second nearly so.

"Maybe the reason you're having trouble finding your place is that you haven't discovered your virtue yet," Watcher offered out of thin air.

I stopped. "What? How did you know… oh, nevermind." Then, "What do you mean, my virtue?"

"Well," the flying ball began, "The greatest heroes of Equestria, ponies with lifelong bonds of unbreakable friendship and strength, were each known for exemplifying one of the great virtues of ponykind. Kindness, honesty, laughter…"

"Laughter is a virtue?" I asked dubiously.

"Roll with me on this," the sprite-bot continued without breaking stride. "Generosity, loyalty and magic. They really didn't know themselves, or each other, until one pony came to realize that her friends represented these virtues, and together they grew to live by them. Now, I'm not saying those are the *only* virtues, they are just a…" Now the bot paused as if searching for words. "…particularly important set. I'm just saying that perhaps if you learn to recognize the dominant virtue in your own heart, you will find yourself. And you won't need anyone or anything else to tell you your place in the" Watcher's voice cut out with an abrupt pop and music once again poured from the bot.

"Brilliant." I watched as the sprite-bot slowly sailed away.

Well, if that wasn't a load of ponypies, I didn't know what was. Finishing my soda, I tossed the empty bottle amidst a pile of others. Empty bottles littered the Equestrian Wasteland like weeds.

A new thought was occurring to me. About Watcher. The Wasteland Survival Guide had to be written after the megaspells rained down. Long after, considering its sound advice on scavenging. So that book wouldn't have been in the Ponyville Library as part of the original, pre-war library. It found its way in there later; from the lack of being burned, defaced or covered in blood, I was guessing recently. Which made me wonder: did Watcher know about those poor ponies the raiders held captive? And if so, is that why I was talked into going there? Was I manipulated into walking into that horror because Watcher hoped I would free them? I couldn't be sure. And considering that Watcher saved me, I should give the benefit of the doubt. But I couldn't help the niggling sense that Watcher had played me, and I don't like being tricked.

My ears perked as the music stopped again, replaced by a voice. But this wasn't Watcher's voice. This was somepony else. This voice wasn't metallic. It was the voice of a smooth male pony with a greasy charisma.

> *"Friends, ponies, rejoice! Although the world about you is bleak, scarred and poisoned by the war of honorless, thoughtless, inferior ponies of the past, we do not have to live in the shadow of their greed and wickedness. Together, we can raise Equestria back to its former beauty! Together, we can build a new kingdom where all live together in perfect unity! It's already happening, my good ponies. Already, the foundation for a new and wonderful age is being built. Yes, it's hard work, but don't we owe it to ourselves, and to future generations of ponies, to be better? No, to be the best we can possibly be? I'm telling you now, as your friend, as your leader, that we can. We must. And we WILL!"*

What in a fever dream was that??

The music had resumed – not popping back in the middle of a song like when Watcher seized control of a sprite-bot, but at the beginning of a new song, like this was how the bot was supposed to work.

Wait, ponies have a leader now? That was serious news to me. As far as I could see, we didn't even have a country. Hell, I'd settle for a town! Even just a few shacks built within vague proximity of each other, so long as they had ponies living there in peace. Or as close to peace as the wasteland allowed.

If we had a leader, we had to have at least one town, right?

Trotting faster now, I found a ruin with enough intact stairs for me to get up to what was left of a second floor. I brought out the binoculars and looked about. Sure enough, in the distance, I saw smoke. Enough plumes, close enough together, to suggest some sort of settlement. I prayed to Celestia that the smoke was from cooking fires, not raiders burning it to the ground.

There was a path leading out towards the settlement. That would keep me from losing my way. And there was movement on that path. My horn glowed as I focused the binoculars, bringing a small group of ponies into view. Two of them were pulling a heavily laden wagon. A young pony rode on its back, apparently talking with two others who were guiding equally-burdened two-headed beasts. The group was headed towards me, away from the theoretical town. But they didn't look like they were fleeing, and none of them were wounded, all of which I took for a good sign. A very good sign indeed.

I looked up into the thick, broiling clouds, up to where the disk of the sun made a brighter spot in the cloudy ceiling, and sent a prayer of thanks to Celestia.

⁂

The path wasn't a road, exactly. Rather, it was a long, arcing swath cutting through the Equestrian Wasteland. Two parallel metal lines reinforced with badly-aged cross-planks of wood. Half-an-hour back, it had crossed over a gully on a rickety bridge. After my fun with catwalks, I chose to brave the gully rather than put my hooves on something else that was surely holding off its inevitable collapse until it could take me with it.

It turned out to be a good decision, despite the wounds. The gully had been home to a bunch of large, bloated pig-things with extremely nasty front teeth. One of them got ahold of my left hindleg, biting clean through my armor and cutting a deep gash.

Little Macintosh is neither quiet nor subtle. A single shot from that sweet little gun tore the head clean off the pig-thing attacking me! And it fires quickly enough that I was able to slay the three others before my targeting spell ran out.

Beneath the bridge was somepony's camp. It had a long-abandoned feel to it, but there were scattered supplies, including a few cases of shotgun ammo, a single can of food amidst a litter of tin cans ("Magical Fruit" the label boasted, but it turned out just to be beans), and a locked medical box. I picked the lock easily, finding a healing potion which I swiftly drank, breathing a sigh of relief as the nasty gash mended gently, the pain ebbing away. There were magical bandages, nowhere as powerful as a potion but good for flesh wounds, and a box of… mints? ("Mint-als! Refresh your mind and your breath!" I had been surprised to see a smiling zebra on the front of the box, the first depiction of a zebra I'd seen that didn't look like a storybook villain.)

Now I figured I was over halfway to the settlement, maybe two-thirds. I tried to keep myself from imagining what I would find. (A whole city of civilized and happy ponies, maybe.) I didn't want to to set myself up for a letdown. "Even a few shacks" I told myself. I picked up the pace of my trot.

I heard a gunshot shot in the same instant that I felt a bullet tear clean through my right hindleg and another clang off the metal casing of the sniper rifle strapped to my back. I screamed in agony, collapsing to a skidding halt on the rocky ground, clutching at my hindleg. I was bleeding profusely through the hole torn through it. The bullet missed the bone, and I could tell that sickeningly because I could see it! I tossed my head back and screamed again.

Desperately, I dragged myself around a large mound of rocks, trying to take shelter from a shooter I never saw. Focusing as much as I could through the terrible pain, I pulled the magic-laced medical bandages from my pack. I tried wrapping my bleeding hindleg, but the bandages were meant for cuts and gashes, not gaping holes. It was soaked with blood and sliding off almost before I had finished wrapping it. I tossed the bandage and tried again, this time pulling the bandage much tighter. It too soaked bright red, but at least it stayed.

Shaking with fear and pain, knowing from the sudden chills that my body was going into shock, I looked up and tried to spy the pony who attacked me. I looked all around, but no one was there! And there wasn't a whole lot of cover to be hiding in; these hills of dirt and rock were mostly barren. I felt like my heart swallowed an ice cube when the image hit me that there was a pony out there with a StealthBuck! She could be right next to me, pointing her gun at my head, and I wouldn't even know!

But then I looked upward, and there in the sky was a rust-coated pegasus pony with an orange mane under a black desperado hat, and what looked like two rifles, one strapped beneath each wing. The pony had just finished circling back around and was aiming right at me!

With panicked instinct, I levitated a large rock in front of my face as a shield. A crack rang in the air, two rifles fired simultaneously! The first bullet struck the rock, sending chips of stone flying, and ricocheted, lodging in my canteen. The last of my water burbled out at my hooves. The second punched through my armor and embedded itself in my left shoulder, sending me reeling. Again, I collapsed, the pain peaking and then beginning to bleed off, which I knew wasn't a good sign. This time, I didn't think I would be getting back up again.

So, this is what it was like to die? So overrated.

My eyes felt heavy. I closed them, I don't think for long. But when I opened them again, I spotted the ponies drawing their wagon, coming over the hill. Behind them would me more ponies, guiding pack… two-headed cattle-things. I remembered the young pony in the back of the wagon.

I doubted any of them would be looking up.

Forcing myself to my hooves, I began dragging myself into the open. If I was going to die, it wasn't going to be laying down, watching these people get slaughtered! My body screamed agony into my head, but I kept going, marching myself on lame legs until I was standing in the path right in front of the approaching group. Turning, and focusing through the hammering in my head, I lifted Little Macintosh into the air and pointed it at the rust-colored pegasus who had whipped back around and was again flying right at me.

I stood directly between him and the travelers. My vision was blurry from tears and trauma. I wasn't sure, even with S.A.T.S., that I could hit him. And I stood no chance against his aim. He was an amazing shot; technically, he hadn't missed me yet.

Putting every ounce of me into it, I growled as menacingly as I could. And hoped that a pony who had survived four shots would be mistaken for a pony to be reckoned with. "Shoot at me all you want, but if you attack that family, *I will! End! You!*"

To my surprise, the pegasus's eyes widened, and instead of firing, he backflapped his wings, coming to a halt in front of me. "Whoa nelly!"

Levitating Little Macintosh was getting really hard. I'd lost all feeling in my shot leg, and fell onto my haunches without realizing.

"Ah ain't the one attackin' that caravan! You are!"

What!? Black was seeping into my vision from all sides. My head was swimming. The conversation wasn't making any sense. But at least he was conversing rather than killing me. Weakly, "…not attacking. *You* shot *me*."

"Well of course ah shot you! Ah see a raider headin' at a caravan, ah'm gonna perforate her till she ain't movin' no more!" The rust-colored pony glared at me. Then, with a strangely proud look, "It's muh policy."

I felt my forelegs beginning to give. I was near collapse. But the words of the pony caused a fire to flash in my head. Little Macintosh had begun to sink towards the ground, but now it swung back up, pointed right between my attacker's eyes. "I'm *not* a *raider!"*

The pony pointed at me argumentatively. "Y'sure *look* like a raider!"

Seemingly from out of nowhere, the colt from the wagon galloped into view. I tried to raise my voice in warning, but nothing came out. The blackness fighting to overtake my vision finally won, and I collapsed, sinking into what felt like a deep sleep.

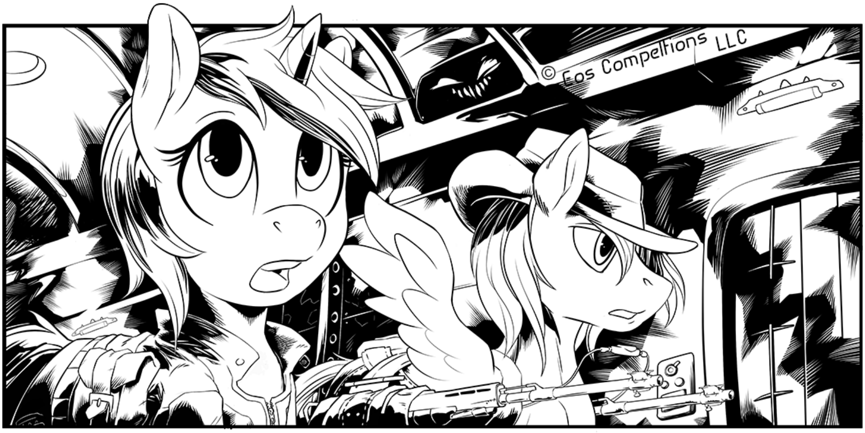
The last thing I heard was the colt whinnying, "Calamity, what have you done?!"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Egghead – You will add +2 skill points each time you gain a new experience level.

CHAPTER FIVE

Calamity



"Friendship. Friendship never changes."

Alive!

I was still alive!

As consciousness came back to me, I found myself laying on a mattress, with blankets tucked about me, feeling warm and rested and more comfortable than I had since before I left Stable Two three days ago. At least, I thought it was three days; I had no idea how long I had been unconscious. By habit, I lifted up my forehoof to check the date and time on my PipBuck. Doing so unsettled the blanket, which proceeded to slide to the floor.

"Oh! Look who's awake!" The pretty voice of a mare awfully close to me shocked me into full alertness. Looking up and about, I found myself surrounded by several ponies, only one of which I recognized – and that was the pegasus who shot me up in the first place! I wondered if I was his prisoner.

The voice had come from an equally pretty white-coated earth pony whose cotton-candy pink mane matched the pink and yellow-stripped nurse's dress she was wearing. Scanning what I could see of the walls through the small crowd of ponies, I saw a line of three medical boxes (all the little pink butterflies perfectly in a row) and a faded pre-war poster apparently advertising jobs in health care services ("You don't need to be a Steel Ranger to be a Hero! Join the Ministry of Peace today!" announced the mare on the poster, barely more than a filly, who wore the exact same dress that I saw brought to life before me). Between the décor and the lack of ropes or chains, I concluded this was a clinic, and I was not a captive.

Besides, I was actually feeling quite good. Tired, almost like I needed a good nap… except I wasn't sleepy. Just tired, and kinda warm. I sat up and the room spun.

"Take it easy there, partner," the pegasus whose name I recalled was Calamity –

although I was a bit fuzzy on how I had learned that – said, stepping towards me. I scooted back on the mattress. Oh sure, he looked polite and gentle now, with all these ponies around; but I'd seen him when he was all murder-from-above guns-blazing death-pegasus.

"Candi?" one of the other ponies, a grey-coated earth pony with black mane and tail, asked as he looked to my nurse (although to me it sounded like he was calling her candy, and I felt an oddly cheerful urge to agree).

"Oh, she'll be perfectly fine. Ah mixed up the last healing potion she needed and gave it t' her less than an hour ago."

"Mixed?" The grey earth pony raised an eyebrow dubiously.

Candi smiled. "Why with apple schnapps, of course! Ah find the medicine always goes down better that way." I couldn't understand why the grey pony facehoofed. I felt perfectly fine now. Better than fine. And pleasantly warm.

The grey stallion started shooing all my guests away. That made me feel slightly sad, although I really didn't know any of them. I had felt so lonely the last few days, so eager to find civilization, and here it was, but he wasn't letting me keep it. A thought which I realized didn't quite make sense, although I wasn't sure why.

"Come on out when you're feeling up to it. I know there's some ponies who would like to see you." The grey stallion smiled at me. Then looked at the rust-colored straggler. "You two, Calamity. Out you go." Calamity took one look back at me before scooting out.

Candi pranced up to me, whispering dreamily, "Such a handsome stallion, isn't he?"

"Who?"

"Why Calamity, of course!" She giggled.

I was at a loss for words. No, no I wasn't. "He shot me."

She waved that off with a hoofwiggle. "Ah'm sure t'was just a misunderstandin'."

It was, I recalled, but… why was I having this conversation? If anything, I wanted to talk about how pretty Candi was (candy Candi!), not to talk about Calamity. Least of all whether or not he was handsome. None of which seemed to find a suitable way to be spoken aloud. Sulkingly, I fell back on reiterating, "He shot me…" Then added, "…a lot."

* * *

More rested, and with a much clearer head, I was eager to meet the ponies of New Appleloosa. By my PipBuck, I'd been out of it for nearly two days.

I gazed over the railing at the walled village. Multiple lines of what I had realised were railroad tracks converged into a town made up largely of dozens upon dozens of virtually identical homes built from old passenger cars, many of them stacked two or three high. Most still had their wheels. Heavy metal boxcars formed a ring around the town, with a massive gate on either side. Armed pony guards walked around the tops of the boxcars, keeping their eyes on the wastes outside. Inside, scores of earth and unicorn ponies trotted about their daily lives. The place was dirty, rusty… and altogether wonderful!

"How did you get them stacked like that?" I asked, looking up at the stacked train cars, the tallest group being four high. Railing and catwalks spanned out from it, connecting to other towers. On the highest roof, brilliantly glowing letters announced Turnpike Tavern.

Railright, the grey and black stallion who turned out to be sheriff/mayor/general-hold-togetherer of the town, deadpanned, “Had one o’ the unicorn ponies do it.”

I turned with a gasp, staring at him. I’d never heard of a pony levitating anything that big or heavy before!

Railright held that serious expression just a moment longer before chortling. “Ah’m just playin’ with ya.” My astonishment faded to a sheepish grin as he smiled and pointed towards the sky behind us. “That’s what the crane is for.” Looking back and up, I could see the huge orange tower of metal jutting above the town, a massive hook dangling from it’s long arm.

“Although,” he continued, “If yer lookin’ for a heavy lifter, ya can’t do better than Crane. Ya should talk t’ him.”

“Talk to the crane?” I said slowly, trying to gauge if this was another joke. But it wasn’t.

Crane, he told me, was the name of a unicorn pony who worked in the trainyard. “Won’t find a stronger telekinetic this side o’ the Canterlot Ruins.” With that, Railright offered to give me the grand tour.

⁂

New Appleloosa’s general supplies store was called Absolutely Everything. It was the fourth stop on the tour. Railright smiled knowingly as he coaxed me towards the odd-looking building. Three train cars, each a different type, had been fused together to create the store; one of them was a barrel-shaped car of black metal dominated by a smokestack. This was one of the sources of smoke I had seen from a distance. Pausing in front of the door, I read the signs beneath the playful block letters of the store name:

Yes, I do deliveries!
No hooves, nasty stingers? No service.
Ask me about special orders! I won’t answer, but I’ll get right on it!
Wasteland Survival Guide! Available now! First copy for every family is free!

I pushed the door open and stepped inside. And stopped with a gasp as I saw the zombie-pony from the raider library. I could tell she was the same one by the way one of her eyes rolled up. The fact that she recognized me with an immediate, bright smile and dashed over to give me (an uncomfortably squishy) hug, were admittedly also clues.

She backtrotted and waved a forepaw about in what was a surprisingly effective combination of welcome and showing off of the store. (Something I hated to admit I was thankful for; the stench of her as she hugged me forced me to hold my breath. I had been sure gagging would have been impolite.)

“uh… Hello again,” I said, feeling a little awkward. Last time this pegasus zombie-pony saw me, I was trotting off to put a bullet in a raider’s brainpan.

“Howdy” said a familiar voice from off to my left. I’d been so focused on the zombie-pony that I’d totally missed that there were other people in the store. Turning, I found Calamity looking back at me with a bashful smile. “Look, ’fore ya scamper, ah just want t' say how sorry ah am!"

I didn't scamper, although I did take a cautious step back.

"Ah've been gettin' the story from Ditzy Doo here, see…"

Ditzy Doo? I turned to the pegaus zombie. "*You* wrote the Wasteland Survival Guide?" Both Ditzy Doo's eyes managed to focus on me and she absolutely beamed with joy, nodding fervently.

Yes, I do deliveries. Suddenly, I had a very good idea how that book ended up in the Ponyville Library. Which, in turn, fortified my suspicions about Watcher.

While I was thinking, Ditzy Doo had rushed up, another copy of the book in her mouth, and was stuffing it into my saddlebags. The zombie pony was amazingly kind and generous and had a severe problem with personal space.

I opened my mouth to say something, maybe that I already had a copy (although considering there had been several pages torn out of the copy on the raider's table, having another could still be quite helpful). However, whatever I was about to say got derailed by a strange realization. "You… don't talk much, do you?" Could zombie-ponies talk?

Ditzy Doo stepped back and opened her muzzle wide, giving me more a look at the inside of her mouth than I ever wanted. Calamity focused my attention, "Ditzy Doo's tongue was cut out by slavers a few decades ago. She gets by without it real well though." So then Monterey Jack's warning had been cringingly accurate.

Ditzy Doo trotted to the sales counter, where she picked up a pencil in her teeth and scribbled something on the first sheet of large pad of note paper. She dropped the pencil and held up the notepad, her eye going weird again.

Looking strictly at the paper so my gaze didn't rudely follow her eye, I read aloud, "Because I couldn't talk, I took up writing. If it hadn't been for that, I would never have gotten so good at it." I looked up at her with a blink.

Ditzy Doo put down the pad, picking up the pencil again, and added a line before lifting it again for me to read.

"Now, how about we get you some better armor?"

* * *

Bottle caps? That's what ponies use for money out here?

As absurd as it was, and it was ludicrous, I should have seen that coming. No wonder raiders were hoarding the things. No wonder there were empty bottles littered everywhere, but not a bottle cap to be found. (Except, of course, for the one I tossed casually away somewhere outside Ironshod Firearms.)

My stable utility barding was back at Absolutely Everything. Ditzy Doo didn't have any armor in my size, but swore she could modify my barding so it was better than the best armor any raider could scrounge together. She offered to do it for free, but I insisted on paying for her work. And that's when I discovered the absolutely cockeyed (no offense to Ditzy) barter system used throughout the Equestrian Wasteland.

"Bottle caps. Seriously."

Fortunately, pre-war money was still worth something, if only in bulk. If for no other reason than that they could get sodas out of the few machines that hadn't simply been pried open and raided already.

Ditzy Doo took all but a few of my coins; I had no idea if what I had given her was a fair price, but I suspect I was getting a generous discount. She also insisted on giving me a sheet of paper detailing an entirely different use for bottle caps – a way to turn them into homemade mines. Apparently, it was going to be an insert for the Wasteland Survival Guide's chapter on mines that somepony discouraged her (probably wisely) from including.

When I had left Absolutely Everything, Railright commented, "Ditzy Doo's our resident pegasus. As well as our resident ghoul."

Right, because ghoul-pony sounds so much better than zombie-pony.

"Although," he had continued, poking a hoof towards Calamity, "Ah keep telling this one he's always welcome t' settle down here in my town. He's been keepin' the caravans safe for goin' on four years now."

Now, as I was on my way to meet Crane, with Calamity trotting along beside me, I finally ventured conversation with the rust-colored stallion. "So, you don't live here?"

"Nope. Got my own place 'bout a half-hour's flight distant."

I thought over what I knew of pegasus ponies. "A place up in the clouds?"

I could swear Calamity's eyes widened just bit. "Oh no. Just a shack. Something somepony threw together a few generations ago, only t' get eaten by the wild animals in these here parts."

I'd already encountered some of the wild animals in these parts.

As we walked down the catwalk, my gaze fell to the strange weapon that Calamity wore, my eyes following from the gun barrels to the odd metal protrusion that stuck out in front of him – a control mechanism, I suspected. I opened my mouth to ask him about it, only to find myself looking at air. I stopped and looked back; he had halted abruptly to let by a mare in a straw sunhat and her colt. The mare was apparently having trouble keeping the colt from dashing off at top speed. She looked like she wanted a leash.

"But ma! I wanna go see Derpy!"

Calamity leaned close and whispered, "That's what some folks call Ditzy Doo. Cuz of the eye." Yeah, because that's what they'd focus on; the bullies back in Stable Two would totally have ignored the whole putrefying flesh thing for that. "She doesn't seem t'mind. Ah actually think she finds it endearing."

I did not point out that Ditzy Doo didn't seem to mind having her tongue cut out either. Didn't make it right.

"Trolley, you get back here," the mother called out as the colt started to trot a little too fast. "And you stay away from that store. I don't want you bothering that thing."

Thing? Okay, I'll admit I'd thought of her as an "it" a few times, but that was back when I thought she was dead. I stopped.

"Excuse me, miss. I'm new here. Is there something wrong about zo… ghoul ponies?"

The mare looked abashed, staring more at Calamity than me. I didn't need to look; I could feel his scowl.

"Well… nothin' against good ol' Derpy. Ah mean, miss Ditzy Doo. But… well, y'know…"

"Know what?" I persisted, trying not to hint at the shame I was feeling for having balked at her smell or the grossly squishy way her hug felt.

"Well…" The mare looked about furtively, then lowered her head, whispering, "Y'know they're all like tickin' time bombs, right? Ah mean, you can see what bein' a ghoul is doin' t' their outsides. Imagine what it's doing t' their brains. They all go mad sooner or later. Dear Ditzy, she's lasted a good long time an' she's only a li'l crazy for it. But someday… Ah just don't want my boy t' hurry that along none. Or be there when she does finally turn on us all."

With that, the mare drew herself up, pulled Trolley close, and hurried off. Away, notably, from Absolutely Everything.

I stood there a long time, stunned. Finally, I asked Calamity, "Is that true?"

Calamity sighed deeply, which was not a good sign. "Ayep… for most of 'em anyway. Ya get inta the wrong places, y'll find yerself hunted by whole packs of cannibal ghoul-ponies gone zombie. But, an' I mean this, that's only most of 'em, and even they're good pony folk, if a little smelly and strange-lookin', until that day. Some, like Ditzy Doo, break the odds an' *never* lose their noodle."

I understood the spirit of his words, but the news didn't make me scared of the hairless pegasus writer. It made me ache for her.

* * *

Crane was a yellow unicorn pony with an orange-and-beige striped mane and tail. He wore a bright orange construction hat with a hole in it for his horn. When we found him, he was loading barrels onto the flatbed of a train car – this one actually still on the tracks that ran through town and connected to several others.

"Howdy! Pleased t' meet the little mare with the PipBuck who saved Sweet Apple and Ditzy Doo! Not t' mention Desert Rose, Barrel Cactus an' Turquoise!" He stopped to shake my hoof vigorously.

"Please to meet you too," I smiled, feeling a touch wobbly after the hoofshake. "Railright told me you're the pony to talk to if I wanted to see some heavy lifting."

Crane smiled, then causally lifted three barrels at once, putting them in their places on the flatbed. "Reckon Ah am." Then, to my shock, he asked, "What kinda spells ya got?"

"Spells?" I replied hesitantly.

"Ya know," he continued talking while three more barrels levitated by, glowing with the same light as shown from his horn. "Unicorn ponies generally have a small collection of magical spells, usually related t' what he or she is destined t' be best at. ('Cept for the ones who are destined t' be good at spells, o' course, cuz then they get a whole heap of 'em.) Me fer instance, Ah can make all manner of repairs t' the rails an' trains just by focusin' at 'em."

Crap. Kicking a hoof at the ground, I sighed deeply. "Nope. Just telekinesis. No spells." I knew it was pathetic. Levitation was basic filly stuff. By the time I got my cutie mark, every *other* unicorn in Stable Two had a nice collection of spells. Thank you, Crane, for reminding me that I was probably the most un-magical unicorn ever.

Crane's eyes widened in surprise. And he quickly changed the subject. "Now Ah've got lots o' work t' do, but ah tell y' what. If y'all would do me a small favor, Ah'll return it by teachin' ya everything Ah know 'bout heavy liftin'."

Sounded great to me. "What's the favor?" Fetch him a soda? Maybe some lunch? Help tie down the barrels on the flatbed?

"We been havin' a small bit o' trouble with the things that've been crawling up outta that ol' Stable west o' here. From what Ah hear, y'all are might brave an' no slouch w' slingin' a firearm. Jus' get down t' the Stable an' close the door. I reckon we can clear out the varmints up here if somepony locks off their breedin' grounds."

Okay, not a soda run.

* * *

"So why are you with me again?" The sky had darkened prematurely. I would soon have to turn on the lamp spell of my PipBuck.

"Ah figured Ah owe ya one," Calamity said earnestly as he followed beside me. "Maybe a whole mess o' ones, considerin' all y' did for the good ponies of New Appleloosa."

With a sigh, I tried to console him. "You couldn't have known. I was wearing blood-caked raider armor." And carrying an arsenal that would make the average raider radioactive in envy.

"Caked in raider blood. Armor ya only had cuz ya needed protection while saving the lives of five good townsponies!"

"Only four, really. Ditzy Doo saved Sweet Apple."

"An' you saved Ditzy Doo so she could save Sweet Apple. In muh book, that makes five." He took a deep breath. "Besides, ah can't consent t' ya goin' down there alone. Ah've heard dark stories about those Stables. Bad, bad things happened down in too many of 'em."

"*I* came from a Stable. Hell, everypony came from somepony who came from a Stable, right? I can see why an empty one would be an inviting nesting ground, but it's not like the Stables are cursed or sinister."

Calamity mulled that over. "Ah suppose yer right 'bout that. All 'cept the few like Ditzy Doo who somehow survived the apocalypse on the surface, or are descended from folk who did."

I halted my trot so abruptly I nearly fell over. My surviving canteen, refilled, swung out and back, smacking me in the chest. "Ditzy Doo survived the war? She's *that* old?"

"Ayep. Ghoul-ponies don't age like normal pony-folk do."

The idea of a pony who had actually been around way back then, who knew what actually happened, blew my mind away. "What's her story?"

Calamity snorted a laugh. "So long ah couldn't even guess at most of it. Ah do know she was flyin' outside Cloudsdayle when that first megaspell hit it. She was caught at the very edge of the magical energies that wiped the entire city out of existence. Been a ghoul ever since."

I nodded, continuing on in solemn silence, the image of entire city in the clouds filled with pegasus ponies playing out in my head. There one minute, and then just nothing.

The clouds above started to leak.

* * *

It was like being in a shower back in Stable Two. Only the shower was *everywhere!* And it didn't stop. If I hadn't been cleaned by Candi the day before, I would have welcomed it, despite the cold of the water. Now, soaked to the bone, I just found it miserable.

The sky had turned so dark I had to turn on my PipBuck's lamp spell to see ahead of me. In theory, it was still daylight, but that was hard to believe. A ferocious wind had picked up out of nowhere and was whipping the rain at us like a weapon. "What's going on?!?" I cried out to Calamity above the storm.

"It's a thunderstorm. An' a mighty big one. We best be findin' some shelter, cuz it's just gettin' started!"

"Thunderstorm?" I hollered back as a patch of clouds lit up briefly but brilliantly. "What's thunder?"

KA-BOOOOOOOM!!!

The sky exploded! It was like the sound of a gunshot, if the gun was wielded by Celestia Herself and was made out of pure awesome. I actually tried hiding under Calamity.

"Get ahold o' yerself there!"

Timidly and a little bashfully, I backed up and got to my hooves. Another flash illuminated the whole countryside in stark white and shadow, gone before I realized it had happened. Another mighty boom tore at the sky following close behind the flash. Calamity had to put his forehooves on me to stop me from trying again.

"If y'all are that scared o' the thunder, wait 'till ya actually see the lightnin'!" He chuckled. "Now let's get ta movin' so's we can find some shelter."

Each flash of light in the clouds was followed by a terrifying crack or a mighty boom. A little later, I did indeed see the lightning. I'd been envisioning lightning bolts like those blasts of electricity the brain-bots had been shooting at me. This was *nothing* like that. This was a white tear through the sky, like the universe itself had been slashed open. It lasted an eyeblink, but I still saw its afterimage floating in front of my face for several minutes later.

I also saw somepony, or I thought I did, in the far distance on a hilltop briefly illuminated by the lightning. I couldn't tell if it was a unicorn or a pegasus… at first, I thought it was both. But the vision was gone before I could be sure I had seen anything at all.

We galloped, the ground beneath us increasingly muddy and treacherous, until we were forced to stop by a raging, frothy river. The muddy, rushing water was tearing away at the banks on each side. I could see the black shapes of uprooted dead trees as they were carried away.

Just beyond the other side rose a cliff-face. Water was pouring down the cracks of the cliff in a hundred rivulets, each feeding into the river at the bottom. Across from us, just a little way up the cliff, was the dark mouth of a cave, the path up to it already washed away.

I stood their staring helplessly, trying to figure out how we were going to get across. Then I felt myself being lifted into the air as Calamity flew us over the river and set me down in the mouth of the cave feeling stupid.

I stepped further in, shining the lamp of my PipBuck into the cave. The path continued up about a yard, then took a steep decline with frightfully old metal stairs, rusted nearly black, leading to a concrete landing. Once at the landing, the rough walls were replaced by stonework. At the end, a very familiar-looking steel door hung open on its hinge-arm. The number 24 was emblazoned on the center of the door. Beyond lay a rusted, ruined doppelganger of the place I had once believed would forever be my home.

Calamity rushed past me. “Don’t just stand there gawkin’. Help me get this door shut before that darned river spills its banks completely and floods this hole!” He was trying to push the door physically. I looked down, noticing for the first time that the floor of the cave was already a puddle, two inches deep and growing.

Moved to action, I rushed to the controls. I paused long enough to check the bolting mechanism (which was actually entirely missing), and making sure I’d be able to open it again. Satisfied I could, I tried to push up the lever. It didn’t want to go. Focusing, my horn glowing brightly, I added my telekinetic strength to that of my hooves. With a loud grinding sound, the lever moved. With a wheeze, the lever arm moved, and the door to Stable 24 slammed shut, groaning in protest.

⁂

“You realize we just shut ourselves into the Evil Scary Stable of Spookiness, right?” I teased my self-invited companion as he stared about the place in wonder.

“ah-Ah’m trustin’ yer right ’bout what ya said earlier. Reckon if anypony knows better, t’would be you.” He shot me a nervous smile. “Besides,” he added, flapping his wings, “not like these are gonna do me any good down here, one way or t’other.”

My eyes caught the harness Calamity wore. The pegasus had twin long-range rifles, one strapped to each side of his body right under his wings, built into a saddle mechanism. Thin metal “reins” reached out in front of him, ending in a bit that hovered a few inches below his mouth. By biting on it, the sibling barrels would fire at once. The saddle was designed to reload on command – possibly triggered by pulling on the bit, or biting differently. I couldn’t tell.

“Hey, Calamity, I’ve been meanin’ t’ ask you, what is that?” I pointed a hoof at the contraption.

“What?” He turned looking around, spinning in place. I couldn’t suppress a laugh. He stopped, looking at me, then back behind him again once more before, “What, you mean my battle saddle?”

I nodded.

“Fine piece of work, ain’t it? I designed it myself!” He reared up, showing it off proudly. Then, at my expression, asked, “Ya mean t’ tell me ya ain’t never seen a battle saddle before?”

I shook my head.

“Well, ain’t that a thing!” He strutted about. “There’s basically two types o’ firearms, loosely speakin’. There’s the small ones that a pony can stick in ’is mouth or levitate ’round if he’s a unicorn. Then there’s the battle saddles, for all the firearms that are just too big an’ heavy an’ have too much kick t’ be wielded without support. Ah’ve seen all kinds of weapons built into battle saddles. Machine guns, rocket launchers…”

“Rocket launchers!” My tail drooped and ears fell back at the thought.

“Ayep! Even magical energy weapons.” He paused. “…though those are damned scarce, so yer not likely t’ ever see one of ’em yerself.”

I filed that away for future reference. After checking my PipBuck for radiation or similar dangers, and E.F.S. for any glows of hostility, I took a long gulp from my canteen and began plotting our course. I was confident from my lifetime in a Stable that I could navigate this one with no problems. If the layout was the same, the door to the right in the next room should lead to stairs headed downward. That would be the cafeteria, living quarters, school and clinic. To the left, a corridor leading deeper into Maintenance, including the ever familiar PipBuck Technician maintenance stall. Without a second thought, I decided we would go right first.

Calamity, meanwhile, had scouted all the immediately adjacent rooms. He came back with a mildly surprised look. "They gots a box o' dynamite in the storage room over yonder."

Okay, that was a bit surprising. I felt my ears stick up. You weren't going to find that in Stable Two. "What was in it."

"Dynamite, ah reckon," Calamity said mock-scholarly. "In truth, Ah don't know for sure. It was locked. And Ah wasn't 'bout t' go shakin' it like a birthday present t' try'n figure it out. On the chance it might be fulla, y'know, dynamite."

I followed the rust-colored pegasus back to the storage room to check it out. But after three tries, and the loss of two more bobby pins (which I was beginning to run alarmingly low on), I had to admit the lock was beyond even my self-proclaimed expertise. Instead, I suggested we move on along the path I originally planned.

The door to the living quarters slid open with a reassuring hiss. The lights gave off a familiar whine… those that still worked. Already, Stable Twenty-Four was making me horribly homesick. Worse, the dull ache in my heart mixed with disconcerting sense of wrongness. Seeing this place in rust and ruins was unpleasant in a way that I couldn't describe. It was like walking through my own, personalized version of the post-apocalypse. I was finding doors that wouldn't open. The floor was strewn with tin cans and litter. The generators, uncared for, were making an odd, rhythmic churring. And from deeper within came chugging, banging and hissing sounds that had no place in a Stable at all. This was a demoralizing, eerie, spook-house version of Stable Two.

I turned to look back at Calamity and caught him picking bottle caps up off the floor. I bit my lip, bracing against a wave of emotion that shrieked he was desecrating the place. Looting and scavenging was survival out in the Equestrian Wasteland. And, logically, that applied to in here too. But, even more than stripping goods off fresh corpses, this felt like grave robbing. Unholy.

My feelings scattered as, overhead, a burst of thunder hit so close to the cave that we could hear it inside the Stable. My heart thumped in my chest. "What the hell…?" I stammered, waving my forehooves to indicate the sky outside.

"Ah told ya. Thunderstorm."

"That isn't like any storm I've read about in my textbooks," I countered.

Calamity looked at me with a softly mocking expression. "Weather ain't like it used 't be. The sun an' moon ain't guided through the sky by ponies anymore. We pegasus…"

"The Goddesses Celestia and Luna move the sun and the moon through the sky each and every day!" I shot back, scandalized. How could he even say that! That was like… blasphemy!

"Oh yeah." He rolled his eyes at me. *Rolled* his *eyes!* "From their place in pony heaven.

Right."

I bristled. He stared quietly until I gave in, motioning for him to continue. "As Ah was sayin', we pegasus ain't around schedulin' the weather, neither. Equestria's weather has gone wild."

I felt a chill down my mane. Through the metal walls and the mountain, we felt the percussion of the storm.

* * *

I had begun to wonder how over-engineered Stable Two must have been for me never to have heard storms like these. Obviously, it was designed to stay closed longer, which I was figuring probably accounted for other architectural differences I had started to notice.

"Huh," I thought aloud. "There's only one section of bathrooms." At least, only one in the living quarters section of the Stable. Back in Stable Two, there were two. One for mares, one for stallions. The floor outside was wet and I could hear a roar gurgling, splashing sounds from behind the bathroom door. Also unlike Stable Two, Stable Twenty-Four was connected to the aquifer, its water supply merely purified with anti-toxin and anti-radiation spells. With the downpour outside, every sink and toilet was backing up.

The same went for the water fountains. The one between the school and the living quarters was spraying brown water. The horrible noises were coming from the pipes and plumbing rather than unnatural monsters.

I stopped dead as a red spot flashed up on the compass of my E.F.S. Somewhere, just ahead of us, was surely one of the creatures Crane had talked about. Not, I realized, that either of us had bothered to get a description.

"So… any idea exactly what sort of 'varmints' we're supposed to be looking for down here?" I whispered as we both crouched down, moving as stealthily as possible.

While bathrooms weren't segregated, sleeping areas were – the main floor for stallions and a lower one for mares. That too was different than Stable Two, where the quarters were geared towards families. My E.F.S. felt annoyingly limited, unable to tell me which level the creature was on, just that it was almost dead ahead now. I levitated out Little Macintosh, ready as I could be.

"Actually no," Calamity whispered back. "And as Ah recall, we ain't supposed t' be lookin' for 'em. We're supposed t' just close the door."

"As I recall," I retorted, maybe a slight bit less quietly than I should have, *"I'm* supposed to be closing the door. You aren't supposed to be anywhere." I couldn't deny that he had a point. In fact, if trapped inside a creature's lair, poking around was probably the dumbest thing a pony could possibly do. On the other hoof, this was another Stable. My curiosity and sense of connection wouldn't allow me to leave it unexplored. And if I was trapped in here for a few hours, well, no time like the present.

Calamity shook his head, but followed all the same.

We moved a few steps closer, and the red spot winked out. I turned quickly, trying to see if it had somehow gotten behind us, but there was nothing. Either the creature had evaporated, or we were right on top of it, one floor up. We crouched there, keeping still and quiet. After a moment, the red spot appeared again, once more right in front of us. And a few seconds later it vanished once more. This time, apparently, for good.

* * *

Aside from age and deterioration, the school in Stable Twenty-Four looked exactly like the one back home. Students tables, all in nice little rows. A sharing area with toys. The teacher's desk, with a terminal, pencils and even a long-rotted apple. The only real difference was a large glass tank which could have once been an aquarium. Even with rusted walls, this felt like home.

It should have been comforting. Instead, it was unpleasantly weird. And it was putting me on edge. The constant banging and screaming of the pipes was adding to my discomfort and giving me a mild headache for good measure. Worst of all, we had encountered three more "ghosts" – hostile entities that appeared on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, but nowhere else – a matter not at all helped by the fact Calamity had no PipBuck of his own so he couldn't tell what I was reacting to.

I was beginning to worry that my Eye-Forward Sparkle, or even my PipBuck itself, had been damaged or warped by exposure to the Equestrian Wasteland. Unlikely, I reassured myself, remembering that they were made to withstand much worse than this. What was more likely, and less comforting, was that the creatures down here had magic of their own.

"Ya ever heard of anypony named Prince Celest?"

"What?" I trotted over, brow furrowing. "Lemme see that," I said, snatching the book from the desk in front of him with a glow of telekinesis. I read a few sentences, then slammed the book shut to look at the cover. It was a children's storybook. "The Stallion in the Moon?!"

Calamity chuckled. "Y'know, Ah think ah member my ma readin' me a story like that… only, it was a mare in the moon, if I recollect."

"That's because it's supposed to be The *Mare* in the Moon!" Quickly, I began looking through the other books on the desks and school shelves. When I was done, I had reached to important-feeling observations. "One: every significant pony in every book had been changed into a stallion…"

"Well, ah suspect some of 'em were stallions t' begin with…"

"Two!" I continued undaunted, even though my voice sounded strained even to my own ears. "Not one story or textbook has anything but the vaguest references to the history or governance of Equestria." Not that Stable Two's library was stellar in that regard – the most recent history in any of our textbooks was over a generation old. But this here wasn't a lack of material. This was a deliberate alteration of facts and context! In the portion of the Stable dedicated to education! This was… it was…

"Y'know, yer gonna burst somethin' if ya don't calm down a touch."

I tossed the book I was holding into the corner with malice. I was about to trot out, indignation wrapped about me like a cloak, when I remember the terminal sitting on the teacher's desk. The screen was giving off a soft glow. I trotted over and prepared to hack into it, only to be slightly disappointed when it offered up its secrets readily. Such as they were. There entries were mainly filled with notes on attendance and grades. Two stuck out though. First:

> *Had a real surprise when we tested the young unicorns on their magic today. I had all my little ponies bring in their pets and show me how they could make them levitate. Simple enough, although a squirming animal can add a level of difficulty for foals at this age. I had to let both Butter and Peridance each borrow the class mascot, since neither have a pet of their own. Peridance was thrilled, but I think Butter is terrified of the snake, even though she's been told it's defanged and harmless. Needless to say, Butter didn't do very well.*
>
> *The real surprise was little Quanta, who has been struggling with even minor levitation all year. Now I know these things have never been recorded in girls, but I can't imagine any other explanation: we had a full magical epiphany occur right in our classroom. Quanta not only levitated herself, but she let out a flash of energy that affected all of the pets in the room. Most just panicked and had to be recovered, but some (including our mascot) seem to have vanished completely. And strangest of all, the arcane flash seems to have transformed Carrot Tail's ugly old cat into… well, an even uglier old cat.*
>
> *It only lasted a moment. Quanta seems fine. Didn't even realize what she'd done. Of course, parents had to be called, and Carrot Tail is traumatized. It will be a miracle if I can teach these foals anything for the rest of the week. Meanwhile, I'm going to write up a proposal to have another unicorn stallion watch over these tests from now on. Just as a precaution.*

The second entry that stuck out was four days later, and it was the last entry on the terminal:

> *I expected a few parents to keep their colts and fillies home after the excitement at the beginning of the week, but by now they should be letting them back. Instead, attendance is at its lowest yet. Over half my students have skipped their classes today. If things haven't turned around after the weekend, I'm going to have to start calling parents. And if that doesn't work, maybe even the Overstallion.*

I stared at that last entry for a while.

"Wait… the Overstallion?"

Calamity looked at me curiously. "What's wrong?"

"This *Overmare* of this Stable was an *Overstallion?"*

He blinked, and then his eyes narrowed just a little. "What's wrong with that?"

"The Overmare is supposed to be an Overmare. That's what's wrong." It was like explaining to a child. But instead of understanding, his eyes narrowed even more.

"Are ya sayin' a feller can't do what a gal c'n do?"

Taken aback suddenly, I tried to find the best way to explain. "N-no. It's not that at all!" I waved my hooves in negation. "It's just… It's just the way it's supposed to be. It's tradition."

He didn't move. His voice was very even. "Ya sayin' that even if there was a feller who was better at leadin' a Stable than any other pony, stallion or mare, and had the cutie mark t' show for it an' everything, that he wouldn' be allowed t' on account he was a buck?"

I gulped, taking a step back. Dammit, but I was *right.* Yet there was nothing I could say to explain that I was right without digging myself deeper. So instead, I just clammed up and said nothing.

Calamity turned and walked out of the classroom. This time, I followed him.

* * *

"Okay, now Ah do feel a bit embarrassed."

In front of us was another door to Maintenance. To our right, the cafeteria. To our left, a maintenance store room. In the store room: a glowing terminal, several shelves of supplies, and a poster on the wall of a mighty stallion standing brave and tall, facing danger head-on, ready and able, while three mares crouched down at his hind hooves, frightened but looking up to him for salvation, adoration evident in their eyes.

Calamity felt embarrassed. I felt something creeping more towards anger.

It wasn't that this turn should have taken us towards the atrium. I could forgive a severe divergence in Stable design (although it did irk me). It wasn't the heroic stallion or the simpering mares. There's a desire to be special and to be admired for your accomplishments that the poster played to which I fully understood. It wasn't even that this was the fifth poster we'd come across and all of them catered to the same gender bias. It was that the stallion in the picture was valiantly holding a wrench in his teeth, and the unspeakable horror that had the girl ponies all cringing like frightened bunnies was apparently a leaky sink.

Carefully, so as not to step on another social mine, "Do you see… why I'm upset? This isn't like, give it to the best pony, who cares about tradition. This is…"

"Ayep. This is manipulation. Alla these posters been here since before ponies trotted up into this Stable to avoid the apocalypse." He turned and fixed me with a look. "It's like sayin tha' a job's only fit fer either a mare or a stallion."

I got the point.

"An' that's only true fer cookin'."

I stopped. My ears shot up and for a moment I bet they could have been steaming. "What?! What's that supposed to…" And then I caught his sly look. "Oh. Ha ha. I guess I deserved that."

"Ayep."

We were quiet a moment. I turned to hack the storeroom terminal and read over the logs of a pony who appeared to be the maintenance supervisor while Calamity hoof-picked some supplies worth scavenging. The clanging and banging of the pipes continued relentlessly. But for a moment, I felt a little less stressed. I felt that I had just made it out of the social minefield, singed but intact. So, naturally, that was the moment everything went to hell.

I had just finished the fourth entry and was partway through the final entry when my E.F.S. flared up with not one "ghost" but five!

Entry One:

I cannot believe my luck. Persimmonie is one fine mare. The date last night went incredibly well. She even let me kiss her! And her little filly, Carrot Tail, seems to like me too. Even better, I kinda like her. I don't have to pretend like I thought I would just to spend some more time with her mother. In fact, we have a second date planned tomorrow night.

Oh, and Greyhorn finally fixed the lighting on level 2-B. That flickering was driving everypony bonkers.

Entry Two:

Dammit, of all the luck. First, the whole lighting strip on guess-which-level blows out, plunging the damned atrium into blackness in the middle of rush. Even worse, Persimmonie postponed our date. Some unicorn filly did something wonky to Carrot Tail's pet, and Persimmonie's been with her all day trying to keep the little cunt from drowning in her own tears. I take it back. I hate children.

Entry Three:

Got called to the Overstallion's office today. Big emergency that required my special talents. Any guesses? He locked himself out again. Again! This is the third time this week. Fortunately, any pony with half a lick of sense could get that thing open. Weakest damn lock I've ever seen. Still, just in case Greyhorn ever has to do it, I've left a handful of bobby pins and a copy of Today's Locksmith in the Maintenance locker room safe. I've even highlighted the most useful bits for him. So as long as he doesn't forget the password, even he shouldn't have a problem. And I made the password his name, so… oh hell, he'll still probably forget it.

Meanwhile, my love life's taken a turn for the worse. Persimmonie's filly is apparently in the clinic. I hear the cat attacked her. They'll probably have to put it down.

Entry Four:

Where the hell is Greyhorn? Idiot missed his whole damn shift today. Called up to his room, but no answer. Goddammit, I've got to do everything around here myself.

Oh, I replaced the entire lighting assembly up on level 2-B and guess what? We're still having problems. I swear to God the ponies who built this whole place must have been cutting corners. Probably cheated Stable-Tec out of fat loads of money. I hope their asses melted when the megaspells hit.

Entry Five:

Still no Greyhorn. Talked with some others, and they haven't seen him either. Suggested I check medical. Would be just like him to find some way to fall and impale himself on his own horn.

Dammit, there's that scratching sound again. Something's managed to get into the ventilation system. I've removed several of the covers on *this floor. Hopefully, whatever it is will fall out and I won't have to send some colt crawling in after it. Did I mention how much I hate children?*

Double-dammit. I just spotted the thing staring down at me. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was Carrot Tail's damn cat. But they caught it and put it down yesterday.

Tripple-dammit! The damn thing just bit me! I swear, I'm going to send a colt up there after it with a flamethrower!

Looking up, I saw the dark opening where the covering grate should have been. And several pairs of alien eyes gleaming at me.

"Calamity, get back, they're in the ventilation!"

Calamity backed away at my shout even as the first creature leapt out, landing on the shelving, spilling a bucket of fuses crashing to the floor. It looked only vaguely feline, but with scales rather than fur, oversized fangs and cat-like eyes save that the slits ran horizontally. Somehow, that last part freaked me out the most.

I had made the mistake of putting Little Macintosh away. When it leapt at me, I didn't have time to draw the gun out, or even think. I reacted instinctually, grabbing the creature telekinetically and hurling it away from me, just like with the grenade. Only this time, we were in a small room and there was no place for it to go, so just thumped back against the wall, pinned and hissing.

A second jumped out, hitting the terminal, and fell to the floor. I raised a hindhoof and brought it down as hard as I could on the creature's head. Rearing up, I treated the one I was pinning to a fatal blow from one of my forehooves.

The third jumped right down onto me, claws catching in my mane.

I screamed like a little filly. "Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!" I bucked, panicking, sending a hindhoof through the terminal with a crunching of glass and a popping explosion. I could feel the hairs around my hoof singeing.

I turned towards the doorway and saw Calamity taking aim.

BLAM!

My mind conjured up a flashback of being wounded and dying, shot multiple times by this very same pony who was swooping down the tracks, aiming at me again. Without thinking, I threw myself to the floor, trying to dodge the shot… a second after Calamity had already fired, ripping the cat-snake-thing apart and leaving me unscathed.

I got wobbly up to my hooves. I tried to smile, although I could feel it was more like a grimace. I could read it in his face: he wanted to tell me I should trust him, to tell me to stop being afraid he was going to shoot me. But he wasn't going to. He couldn't because he knew I had every right and reason to be gun-shy around him. That I should be acting this way.

In that moment, I realized something. He was actually sorry he shot me. Not sorry he shot the new local hero who saved some townsfolk. But sorry he shot me. He wasn't here out of embarrassment. He wasn't trying to fix some loss of reputation or standing, either in his eyes or anybody else's. He really felt regretful that I nearly died.

I didn't even realize I was thinking about him that way. But now I realized I had been. Dammit, now I felt like *I* should apologize to *him*.

He turned away, looking up at the ceiling. "Ah figure the sound of the shot scare't 'em off."

“For now,” I agreed. I had my revelation, but I couldn’t tell him. He’d just deny it, and then there’d be awkwardness. He was a boy, after all…

Dammit! I scolded myself for having such a thought Not that it was hard to figure out what had me thinking like that. I glared at the stupid poster. “I hate this Stable.”

* * *

Little Macintosh whipped around, firing off three more S.A.T.S.-guided shots. Three more of the evil little cat-snake-things were blown into oblivion. They were easy to kill, which hardly made up for being so small, fast an agile. And extremely aggressive!

Several more tried to jump onto Calamity, finding purchase with their claws. He bucked, throwing back his wings, sending them flying, and buck-kicked one of the fallen into a reddish paste. “How many… of these li’l monster… ya reckon we got?”

I fired at one of the creatures Calamity had thrown, missing. And again, hitting this time. The last got by me, leaping for Calamity’s back. I heard him howl as the creature sunk its teeth into the back of his neck.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got it!” I wrenched the creature away telekinetically, my horn glowing fiercely as it brought Little Macintosh up to the mewling thing dripping with Calamity’s blood and pulled the trigger.

“Damn, those things got a bite.”

“Hold still. Let me look.” I was already pulling medical bandages out of my saddlebags. I was nearly out of those. I knew we could get some in either the clinic (which should be ahead) or the living quarters bathroom (which would mean a lot of backtracking).

We had gone through Maintenance, a trip that had been a long, wet but uneventful slog through the lowest part of the Stable which was half-filled with water. We had found the locker room, and with the password we had opened the safe. My bobby pin collection was now far more comfortable, and Today’s Locksmith was tucked neatly in my saddle bags. The only creatures we had found in Maintenance were dead. Drowned. Despite looking like a cross between a serpent and a cat, the little monsters didn’t seem able to swim. Thank the wasteland for small favors when you can get them.

We did, however, start finding skeletons. Sporadically at first, and now in groups. The closer we got to the atrium, the heart of the Stable, the more death we found. I couldn’t hold back the images of someone walking through Stable Two and finding the bodies of everyone I had known for all but the last few days of my life dead like this.

For a moment, it was too much. I had to rest, to clear my head.

No less than nine of the damn things chose that moment to attack us.

Wrapping Calamity’s wound, I grimaced at my lack of medical skill. If I tried to join the “Ministry of Peace” they’d kick me out on my tail. It was bad enough when only I would die if I didn’t know the right end of a potion bottle. I really didn’t like having anypony else relying on my (lack of) skill.

Still, we were up and moving in the right direction. Except we really weren’t, were we? The more I thought about it, the less reasonable my reasons for wandering around down here seemed. Finishing, I turned away and looked back down the way we came. “Okay, that’s it. I’ve been a dumb pony. We turn around, gallop back to the entrance as fast as we can, barricade ourselves and wait the damn storm out. Then we leave and close the door behind us."

"ahm… actually… Ah vote we continue t' the clinic."

I turned, surprised. Seeing Calamity, my surprise turned to shock. Then horror.

"Ah'm guessin' y'all…" he teetered, looking pale beneath his coat. "…would keep somethin' there for… y'know… poison?"

Thump. Down went the pegasus.

"Calamity!"

Chimera

From the personal notes of Doctor Brierberry
Head of Medicine, Stable 24

I've chosen to call this new species "chimera" for what I feel are suitably obvious reasons. The creature is a result of a wild magical burst from a rather exceptionally gifted filly named Quanta. In a flash of uncontrolled magical power, Quanta managed to fuse several creatures within her vicinity into a single being – a fully functional and completely new life form.

The initially created chimera took several days to molt before revealing its true nature, during which time another filly, Carrot Tail, was attacked by the creature. She was rushed to the clinic, but perished within hours from an unknown magical toxin injected into the child by the creature.

After molting, the chimera subsequently attacked a maintenance worker by the name of Greyhorn. This time, both the chimera and its victim were fully mature. Based on the case of Carrot Tail, we treated Greyhorn with antivenom spells and potions, but to no avail. Greyhorn lasted three times as long as Carrot Tail, and was in extreme agony for most of that period. It was only after Greyhorn's death that we learned the key component of the chimera's make-up.

As you will be able to see from the images I am having attached to this document, the feline and serpentine elements of the fusion are quite obvious. (See images C-1 and C-2) What we initially didn't realize, couldn't have suspected, is that there had been some manner of insect in the classroom when Roe cast her spell, and that too was infused into the creature on a deeply inherent level. You see, the fangs of the chimera aren't so much like the fangs of a rattlesnake, but more akin to an insect's ovipositor.

The behavior of this species is extremely aggressive, attacking any suitable host within which it can inject its eggs. Over the course of a single day, those eggs will mature within the host, after which a litter of new, baby chimera will dig their way out of the infected pony, ultimately killing the host if the pony is not already dead. In the case of Greyhorn, five new chimera erupted from his body less than an hour after he was

> pronounced dead. (See image C-3) You can imagine the look on my assistant's face. (But you don't have to. See image C-4)
>
> Fortunately, from the case of Greyhorn, and the baby chimera specimens he provided us with, we have been able to devise and conjure an anti-chimera potion. Unfortunately, some of the herbs required were in tragically short supply, so there is a high probability that we will not have sufficient quantities for everyone. The Overstallion is keeping one bottle locked away in his office, along with the recipe. Meanwhile, I am storing the rest in the medical refrigerator here in the clinic while I wait for the Overstallion's decision on how to implement dispersal.

Oh Celestia have mercy!

By the time I was done reading, horror turned me numb. Slowly, I got up from Doctor Brierberry's terminal and stared about the clinic. There were pony skeletons everywhere. Dozens of them surged towards the open door of the medical fridge. Others were entangled around each other.

A new species, extremely hostile, which renders its victims immobile with a single bite and then tortures them to death from the inside over most of a day… and in doing so can quintuple its number?

I swiftly realized the only thing that had kept the chimera from overrunning the Equestrian Wasteland was that river and the fact that these chimera can't swim. Thank the wasteland for huge favors!

If we survived this, I was going to have a little talk with Crane about his definition of a "small bit o' trouble". Understatement was *not* a virtue in the Equestrian Wasteland.

I looked at the bed Calamity was resting on, looking even weaker than before. Oh Goddess. I couldn't tell him this! Let him think he's poisoned; it's so much better than this.

Pointlessly, I stepped over and swung back the door of the fridge, already knowing I would find nothing inside.

Okay, one last shot. I walked to the clinic window and looked out into the atrium. The room was dark. Every light in it had failed. The only illumination came from the couple still functional lights of the clinic, and the stuttering, flickering light from the circular window in the Overmare's (no, Overstallion's) office above. If there was a single dose of the… "antidote"… left, it would be locked away in a safe up there. The only way to get to it was through the atrium.

The atrium was teeming with chimera.

Swallowing hard, I turned to Calamity. And told him the plan.

After staring at me for a long time, Calamity finally said, "That's insane."

I focused, my horn beginning to glow, and slipped open my saddlepack. "I'll be okay."

"No ya won't! That's suicide. An' ya 'll be killin' both of us!"

I looked at him sternly. "Let me guess. You're thinking you should do it yourself, seeing as you're already… poisoned. Never mind that you can't even stand up without help. And barely with it."

The rust-colored pegasus managed to look cross. "Then get yerself out of here. Least one of us will survive this crazy Stable."

Now I got to play cross. "I'm not leaving my friend behind." I reloaded Little

Macintosh.

Calamity caughed. He looked a me with genuine astonishment. "Friend? But… Ah shot ya."

I rolled my eyes at him. And nodded. "Yes, you did. And I'm planning to needle you about that for the rest of your life. And I'm sure not going to get my blood's worth if you die today."

"Don't be a stubborn fool, LilPip. There's no way in tarnation ya can possibly…"

Levitating the StealthBuck up for Calamity to see, I smiled with a whole lot more confidence than I felt. "I do have this."

* * *

It was, without question, the most harrowing two hours of my life. Inching my way through darkness, surrounded by lethal predators. They couldn't see me. But in the darkness, it was only by my E.F.S. and targeting spell that I was able to keep from stepping on or brushing against one of them.

It was a minefield. And as I crossed, I realized just how calling my own stupidity a "social minefield" did flippant injustice to an actual minefield, and anyone who had ever been caught in one. *This* was a minefield. And all the mines were alive and moving. One wrong move, and it wasn't just I who would die for it.

But I did make it. And for once the wasteland was pouring out the favors. The Overstallion's door was as easy to pick as advertised. From the skeleton, I guessed the Overstallion locked himself in, and I feared he had consumed the anti-chimera potion. But within his locked safe, I found both it and the recipe, as well as an old recording. My guess was that it was his last words. If it had been Stable Two, and I had been the Overmare, watching everyone die because of some magical accident? I suspect I might have done the same.

I took all three items. I figured I should, considering what I was going to do next.

Even after drinking the remedy, Calamity was going to take some time to recover. There was no way to know how long. Lifting both the pegasus and Little Macintosh, I followed my path back, all too aware that the damn chimera were using the ventilation and that even cleared areas were not to be trusted.

I made it all the way back to the storage room near the main door. Sitting down with Today's Locksmith, I went though, finding all the tips I could in a short amount of time. The highlighting really helped.

Outside, thunder shook the mountain reassuringly. I looked up and thanked Celestia for the storm.

The tips from the book proved useful. With a bit of effort and only one bobby pin, I was able to get the box marked dynamite. Inside, there was indeed dynamite. I removed each stick gingerly. Then placed a curled up Calamity into the box, closing it. Should a chimera come for him while I was busy, I didn't want it to be able to get at him.

For the next few hours, I ran back through the entirety of Stable Twenty-Four. Everything but the atrium. I opened each door that could be opened. And then blocked it with a trash can or a tipped-over filing cabinet or anything else that would keep the door from closing.

As for the Atrium, after looting the clinic for medical supplies, I left a stick of burning dynamite on the windowsill of the Clinic and ran.

The rest of the dynamite was to blow the cave opening enough to bring the river pouring in. By the time I was ready to set that off, Calamity had gotten up and wondered why he was packaged as high explosive. His eyes got wider and wider as I explained what I was doing.

"Dayumn!" That was all.

* * *

We'd been down in Stable Twenty-Four for most of the night. It was dawn by the time we returned to New Appleloosa. At least in theory. The storm had stopped pounding the crap out of the wasteland and was now content to just rain on us.

Candi was kind enough to let me crash on an unused bed in her clinic. More than fair payment for giving her the anti-chimera cure. One copy of it, that is.

It was still raining after I woke up, later in the afternoon. And it was late evening before Calamity had woken up and trotted out to join me. By then, I had finally been making some progress under Crane's tutelage. I was panting, sweating heavily, as we stopped for a Sparkle~Cola break.

"I say we're even," I told Calamity as Crane floated an ice-cold Sparkle~Cola over for each of us.

"Ah don't understand."

"If we'd just stayed put at the door, you would never have been bitten."

"If we'd stayed at the door, ya never woulda got the antidote."

"If we'd stayed put, you never would have needed it."

"Ah-ha! But somepony else might! Crane said they'd been havin' trouble with the critters, so obviously some of 'em had been gettin' out."

Crap! I'd forgotten all about that. Still, with luck, and with their nest destroyed…

"It wasn't yer Stable, y'know." Calamity's voice had taken a solemn quality.

I looked at my new friend. "What?"

"Ah know ya grew up in a Stable. But it wasn't *that* Stable." Of course it wasn't. I knew that, but I still wasn't sure what Calamity was getting at.

"It's just… ya seemed t' be takin' what we found down there, Ah dunno… personally." He looked at me earnestly. "Ah just wanted t' remind ya, is all."

He was right, of course. I don't know what I was looking for or I had expected to find. But I'd let Stable Twenty-Four become a personal affront. Stable Twenty-Four had never been my home. I had no relation to it at all. The only threads connecting the different Stables were two hundred years old, dead and buried in a history mostly forgotten. Stable-Tec hadn't existed in a long, long time. I had no allegiance to it, and the long dead couldn't bear any responsibility to me.

"Oh!" I pulled out the recording from the Overstallion's office. "Should we hear what's on it?"

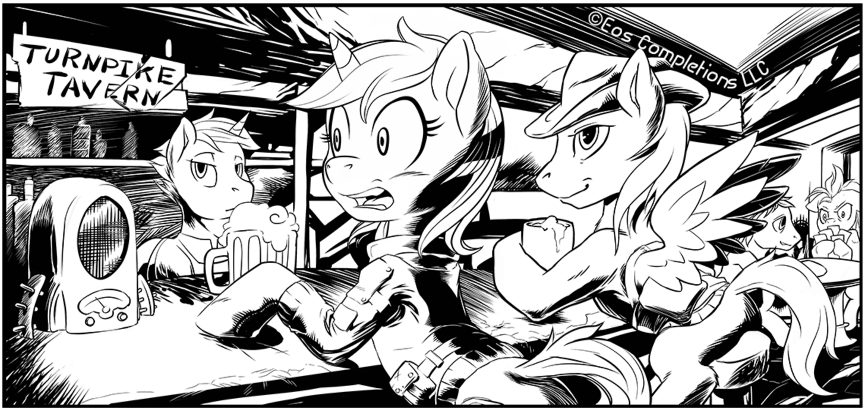
Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Gunslinger – While using a mouth-held or levitated firearm, your chance to hit in S.A.T.S. increases by 25%.

Quest Perk added: Mighty Telekenesis (level one) – You triple the mass that you can levitate with your unicorn magic.

Chapter Six

The Truth of the Matter



"'Tis better to be alone, than in bad company."

"Hello!

"My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me (since I am pretty famous) for my awesome performances at events like last year's GALLoPS, or maybe just as the founder of Red Racer.

"…

"None of which means a damn anymore, of course. If you're hearing this, that means Omega-Level Threat Protocols have been enacted and you are… are now… aww, dammit!!

"Sorry.

"Okay… right now, I'm talking to you as vice-president of Stable-Tec. You have been appointed as Overmare (or, in the case of Stable Twenty-Four, Overstallion) of a Stable-Tec life-preserving Stable. You have been chosen for your sense of loyalty and duty, both to the ponies around you and to this company. And while the Stable-Tec HQ might be… probably is… nothing but blasted rubble now, our ideals live on.

"Your Stable has been selected to participate in a vital social project. The first goal of your Stable, like all others, is to save the lives of the ponies inside. But you also have a higher purpose beyond saving the lives of individual ponies. We here at Stable-Tec understand that it doesn't do ponykind any good to save ourselves now only to annihilate each other later. We must figure out where we went wrong. We must find a better way. And we must be ready to implement it as soon as possible once the Stable doors open. …And survive what our current leaders have managed to do to Equestria…

"…dammit! I-I really hope no pony ever has to h-hear this. Can't this all just be for nothing? They're really going to destroy us all, aren't they?…

"…I'm sorry. Again, I'm totally off script. Where was I? Oh, yeah. In short, Stable-Tec is working to ensure a more… a more Stable society for future generations.

"Inside the safe in your office, you will find a set of special instructions and objectives, as well as details on how your specific Stable has been fitted to carry out your part. If at any point, you believe that your part in the project is threatening the safety and security of the ponies in your charge… as a whole… you are to cease participation and take any necessary steps to rectify the situation. In any other circumstances, however, it is crucial that you keep to the directives provided, and keep Stable-Tec appraised of all results as per your sealed instructions.

"Thank you. From all of us. From all of Equestria…

"…

"Thank you, and may somepony up there have pity on us all."

* * *

Not the message I had been expecting. Now my feelings about the Stables were completely twisted up in my head, and I just wanted to forget about them entirely.

"Away with the old, embrace the new, right?" I clopped my hoof on the counter again. "Apple Whiskey, another of your specials, please!"

Apple Whiskey, the bartending unicorn who owned and ran Turnpike Tavern, poured me another glass. Then, as I watched, he lined up seven apples on the counter – beautiful golden apples quite unlike the pale and flavorless ones back not-home – and waved his horn over them, magically transforming them one-by-one into bottles of the most delicious, pain-numbing, mind-easing fermented apple beverage. Beside me, Calamity clopped his hooves on the floor in applause and several mares in the tavern let up a whoop.

"Dunno why I was surprised," I half-whispered, leaning near Calamity. "Your leader is a stallion, after all."

Calamity's ears perked up and he gave me a look of shocked confusion. "My leader? Ah don't have a leader!" I couldn't tell whether he sounded more offended or worried.

I hoofwaved. "I heard him. Over the sprite-bot. When it wasn't being Watcher."

Calamity looked at me with deeper confusion. And then broke into a too-riotous laugh. "What? Red Eye?" He turned to the rest of the bar. "Hey, everypony. LilPip here thought Red Eye was our leader!"

The whole tavern joined in on the laughter.

"Good Goddess, girl!" cried one of the mares down the counter from us, "Red Eye ain't nothing but a puffed up prancer! Hell, Ah don't even listen to that broadcast! Not when DJ's on the dial!"

"huh?"

"Ayep," agreed a buck from a nearby table as he gathered a pile of bottle caps from his cross-looking companions, many of whom were looking at colorful squares in disgust. "Just let ol' Red Eye try an' come out here and make New Appleloosa part o' his so-called 'new world'! Ah'll personally take all his unity an' brotherhood an' shove it right up his…"

"Just deal!" the pony next to him interrupted grumpily.

"So…" I fought to shove new facts into the puzzle I was building in my head. The drinks were great for forgetting, but not so great for thinking. "…the not-Watcher voice on the sprite-bot is Red Eye, and he's not your leader…"

"What's this watcher stuff?" the mare closest to me asked. "Those sprite-bot's are just radios. Red Eye can't actually watch ponies through them. They ain't cameras!" She turned to Calamity. "I mean, could you *imagine* if he could…?"

Okay, now *that* I knew wasn't true. But apparently the fact those sprite-bots can be used to spy wasn't common knowledge. Watcher had tipped me off to something.

One of the bucks from down the counter called out, "Hey, Apple Whiskey! Put DJ on!" Apple Whiskey looked up to a brown box on the top of one of the shelves which had wires running to speakers throughout the Turnpike Tavern. With a slight glow of his horn, the radio turned on, and a beautiful mare's voice, possibly the sweetest I'd ever heard (or, at least, a close second to Velvet Remedy's) began to pour out of the speakers.

"How did this happen? What have I done?
I was only trying to help, but I caused so much pain.
I wish I could hide. Wish I could run.
I wish I could find a way to do it all over again…"

The voice, and the song she sang, was so solemn and sad and filled with determination that it made my mind go to unhappy places. I soon felt like crying, and had to force myself not to. I figured more drink would help, so I finished mine and clopped for another.

"…I lost sight of the war while fighting my battles.
and now I carry the weight of the world on my saddle…"

Oh, this was unbearable. My heart was breaking, and I wasn't even sure why. I grasped at a distraction, "DJ? Who is DJ?"

The answers came fast, almost too fast to keep up with. It seemed every pony in the tavern had something to say.

"DJ Pon3, of course!"

"There's always a DJ Pon3!"

"Best music in the Equestrain Wasteland!"

"…yeah, all, what, twelve songs? Twenty?"

"He's a ghoul pony. Been around forever."

"No he's not. They keep changing. Back when I was a filly, DJ was a mare!"

"Ah hear he's a pegasus. He's got station up in the clouds. That's how he always knows everything what's goin' on."

"That's stupid. Everypony knows DJ Pon3's station comes outta Tenpony Tower in the Manehatten Ruins!"

"He is too a ghoul pony! He's been around since before the war!"

"Ah heard the original DJ Pon3 was actually a mare named Vinyl Scratch who was killed when the zebra balefire wiped Manehatten. But her nephew was spared, bein' in Tenpony an' all, an' took up the mantle."

"I heard it was her sister."

My head was spinning. Calamity was smirking at me. Leaning close, he whinnied "There's *always* a DJ Pon3."

And in the background, the voice of seemingly infinite beauty and sadness, cried out, *"How can I fix this? How many times must I try? Please, this time, let me get it right!"*

The music died away. And a voice came over the radio.

> *"This is DJ Pon3, and that was Sweetie Belle, singing about that one great truth of the wasteland: every pony has done something they regret. And now, my little ponies, it's time for the news! Now you ponies remember when I told you 'bout those two ponies who crawled themselves out of Stable Two? Well, I've been gettin' reports that one of those little ponies took out the raider nest in the heart of Ponyville, and saved several pony captives – including the beloved author of The Wasteland Survival Guide, Ditzy Doo! Hey kid, thanks! From all of us! And now the weather: cloudy everywhere, with a chance of rain, gunfire and bloody dismemberment…"*

I didn't really hear the rest. I was too stunned. I was on the radio. DJ Pon3 was talking about me. My heart mixed with pride and panic, the latter quickly swallowing the former. I'd been outside less than a week, and I already had a reputation that was spreading across all of the Equestrian Wasteland… a reputation that built me up into somepony far more heroic and capable than I actually was.

> *"…one last thing, the other Stable Dweller was last seen out near Appleloosa. My prayers go out t' that one. And that's the truth of the matter. Now back to the music. Here's Sapphire Shores singing how the sun can't hide forever. From your lips to Celestia's ears, Sapphire!"*

For a moment, everything seemed to stop. What?!? I turned to Calamity, "Near Appleloosa? I thought *this* was Appleloosa!"

Calamity snickered, still not done having fun with me over my wasteland ignorance. "No way, LilPip! This here's *New* Appleloosa! Ya can't have a new without havin' an *old,* now can ya?" Then he quickly got serious. "Now, ya don't wanna be goin' anywhere near old Appleloosa, ya hear me? That's a slaver town!"

Apple Whiskey interrupted. "Well, there's no harm goin' up that way t' trade. Ah sell a good bit o' my trademark apple whiskey to those folk."

I was stunned. Surely he was kidding! "You… trade with slaver ponies!?"

"Ayep. In fact, got a train headed out that way on the morrow."

I looked about with disbelief. "You trade with *slavers!?!"*

Calamity whispered in my ear, "Why ya think I never took up livin' here." It wasn't a question.

⁂

Next morning, I found myself out in the continuing downpour, staring at the train and feeling not a little guilty that I'd spent the last evening helping load the flatcars as part of my training with Crane. That evening would have gone a bit differently had I known where those goods were headed.

"Ah can't talk ya outta this, can Ah?" Calamity stood next to me, checking the loads on his battle saddle.

My head was thudding dully – the aftermath of too much apple whiskey – but I was thinking clearly. I knew this was foalish, but where there were slavers, there were slaves in need of rescue. I knew part of me was just trying to live up to my overblown reputation;

but I'd also been a captive of slavers, if for only a few hours, and I couldn't just ignore the fact that there were ponies up there who needed somepony to care enough to try and help them. "No."

"Well, then Ah'm comin' with ya. Always wanted t' take a shot at that damn place. Figure, if there's two of us, might actually have a chance."

His words left me feeling immensely relieved.

"Ah'll talk to Ditzy Doo fer supplies. Don't want neither of us t' run outta ammo up there. Or food. We c'n take the train up the mountains and out over the desert, but chances are, we'll be trottin' back."

I mulled that over, and suddenly realized that even if we had our own supplies, what about any ponies we rescued? And would they be in any state to make that kind of trip? Not that such questions deterred me at all. But I'd have to find a way to talk the ponies pulling the train to wait for us. As we "robbed" the town they were trading with, no less. I voiced my concern to Calamity.

"Yer gonna hafta do some fast talkin' if ya wanna convince them o' anything like that," he replied, then seemed to have an idea. "Ah know somepony in town that jus' might have whatcha need t' pull that off!"

Calamity trotted off, leaving me staring at the train once again.

While I waited, I tried to familiarize myself with the train. Flatcars and boxcars held supplies. Passenger cars, of which this train had only one, were for carrying ponies. The fancy red car on the back and the big, bronze one with the smokestack which rode at the front were mysteries. I knew nothing about the former, and the latter I only recognized from a similar train car in the hodgepodge construction of Absolutely Everything.

Curious, I asked one of the puller ponies what those cars were for. He was happy to answer.

"That there back one, it's called the caboose." He pointed a hoof towards the red car in the rear. "That has the breaks. Y'see, when we go up the mountain, we have ta keep switchin' out puller teams cuz that there's hard work. One team pulls, one team rides and keeps a lookout fer raiders. But when we go down the mountain, every pony rides. And we use t'breaks t' keep us from goin' too fast."

Now he pointed at the one in the front. "That there's called an engine. It's fer pullin' the train. Although mostly we just use it for the whistle. Keeps varmints off the tracks."

Huh? "For pulling the train? I thought you bucks pulled the train?"

"Ayep. We do."

"Then…"

"Well, cuz the engine don't work without coal. Ain't got no coal, ain't got no coal car even if we had it. So instead, we use pony power."

That didn't make any sense. "So the engine is to pull the train, but the engine can't pull the train, so you all have to pull the train and the engine?" I had to be missing something.

"Ayep."

Arrugh. "Okay… then why don't you have any coal? Where's the coal?"

The train pony rolled his eyes at me, "Oh, their ain't any coal in Equestria." I felt something in my head snapping. "All the coal's in a far, far away land."

"Then… how… was the coal… supposed to get here?"

"By train, o' course!"

Arrugh!! That was it. I needed to stop learning about trains. They hurt my brain. This conversation had made the pounding in my head much worse!

Splashing through puddles, Calamity trotted back. After the train pony had gone back to his work, Calamity reared up and waved his forehooves around, making a mock-spooky face. "Oooooh! All the coal's in strange far-away lands… full of zebras! oooOOOoooh!"

I stared at him non-plussed. "Done now?"

He dropped back to standing and pulled a tin out of his saddlebag, offering it to me in his teeth. I levitated it close for a look. The tin had a scratched out picture of a zebra on it.

"Those what are in there are called Party-Time Mint-als. Brewed up using Mint-als an'… well, some other stuff. Guarenteed to make ya the life o' the party. Those things 'll clear up yer hangover, clear up yer head, an' make you the smoothest-talkin' pony in all the wasteland."

I looked dubious. But then, I trusted Calamity, and what did I have to lose? Telekinetically opening the tin, I pulled out one of the little squares inside and put it into my mouth, chewing experimentally. I had to admit, they were tasty, although the aftertaste was kinda bitter. But I didn't feel any different than I…

WHOA!!!

The whole world shot into stark focus. Colors became brighter and more pleasant. Even the rain seemed nicer. And my thoughts! I was thinking more clearly than I ever had. I was figuring things out I never could before. By Celestia, where had this wonderful stuff been all my life!?

I felt confident. Figuring out just what I needed to say was going to be *easy.* I could talk anypony into anything! And I was about to prove it!

* * *

Hours later, I stared out the window of the passenger car, watching the landscape roll by. Or, at least, as much of it as I could see considering the sky had darkened and the rainfall had escalated again. Remembering rivulets running down the cliff face near Stable Twenty-Four, I prayed the storm wouldn't cause us trouble when going up the mountain.

Talking the train ponies into waiting for us had been easy, making up for the crash when that Party-Time Mint-al wore off, leaving me feeling half-blind and horribly stupid without its help. It was all I could do not to eat another right away. In fact, I would have done so if Calamity hadn't snatched the tin away. Even now, I cast furtive glances at his saddlebags.

Ugh. Think of something else. I tried tuning in the DJ Pon3 station; it was barely audible through a haze of static. New Appleloosa, I figured, was near the edge of good reception. I tried another station on my PipBuck, and found the music of the sprite-bots. Calamity told me to turn it off.

Staring out the window again, I found my mind drifting until it settled on, of all things, Ditzy Doo. I was wearing my utility barding, now upgraded to be effective armor thanks to the strange but cheerful pegasus ghoul. That poor pony, I thought. Seeing her home obliterated, and then turned into a rotted mockery of a normal pony and made to live with that memory for centuries. Raiders, slavers… she'd suffered at the hooves of both of them. Actually seen things that horrified me to contemplate. And as if that wasn't enough, as a ghoul pony, it was as if she had a magical sword hanging over her brain, waiting to drop. It was amazing that she wasn't a broken wreck of a pony. I remembered her smile, wondering how she could be happy…

And then I got it.

Calamity asked, "What's got ya smilin' like that alla a sudden?"

A chuckled at myself, shaking my head. "Laughter is a virtue."

"What now?"

I smiled, holding back a laugh of my own. "Maybe not giggle-giggle laughter, and definitely not bwah-ha-ha laughter… but the kind of inside laughter that allows a pony to take everything this world throws at her and not lose… joy." Maybe it was a little stretch to call that laughter. But it was definitely a virtue!

I turned back to the window, my own spirits somehow higher than they had been in days.

Lightning flashed outside. I gasped, jumping back from the window. I could have sworn I saw a the head of a giant pink pony, the size of an ursa major, peering at me over the hilltop, grinning.

* * *

"Ya ready?" Calamity shouted through the downpour.

The train was approaching Appleloosa (*old* Appleloosa). Calamity and I were standing on the rain-slick roof of the passenger car, wind whipping rain into our faces and pulling at our manes and tails. I nodded.

Wrapping his forelegs around me, Calamity stretched out his wings and caught the wind. The storm snatched us up off the train, and Calamity began to steer us towards a ridge that overlooked the slaver town.

The wind buffeted us, making me fearful that we would crash, but Calamity's course stayed true.

We landed… and I immediately slipped and fell in the mud.

Calamity barked a laugh. I shook really hard, flinging at least half of the mud onto him, and then laughed too.

But then we stopped. Virtue or not, there was a time and a place for laughter. And this wasn't it. I floated my binoculars over to Calamity and then pulled out the sniper rifle to peer down its scope at the collection of dilapidated wooden buildings, derailed boxcars, makeshift metal structures and slave cages that made up old Appleloosa. The train was just pulling in.

Between the darkness of the storm and the distraction of the train, there would never be a better time to sneak in. Through the sniper scope, I could make out the silhouettes of guards walking along catwalks that ran between the buildings and above the cages. In the cages, I could see slave ponies laying under the pouring rain, forlorn shapes in the storm.

I felt a familiar pissed-ness taking hold.

"Calamity, you stay up here. I'm heading down in."

"Ah didn't come all this way t' stay back."

I levitated the sniper rifle to him. "You're my cover. And my quick exit if things go bad. Unless you think you'd be better at picking those locks and I'd be better at flying you out."

He clearly wasn't happy, but conceded my point.

Pulling out Little Macintosh and checking to make sure it was loaded, I started down the slippery ridge. I didn't want to have to use the gun. Not that I was feeling particularly live-and-let-live about slavers. It was just that for all the things Little Macintosh was, it wasn't quiet.

* * *

I was most of the way to the first set of cages when a flash of lightning illuminated the landscape starkly. If it hadn't, I would have been dead a moment later. As it was, I was merely screwed.

Mines.

All around the cages, the fucking slavers had scattered mines. The rain had washed away the dirt covering some of them, the orange metal casings reflecting the flash of light. There were surely more, but I had no idea how many. Or where.

After my session with Crane, I was much better at self-levitation. But that only got me to the fence. I was far less confident that I would have the power to levitate all the slaves to safety.

"Hey, who's there?" A voice out of the darkness, a slaver pony. I wasn't the only pony to have seen something in that flash of light. Dammit!

I scooted, moving as stealthily as I could. I hated to leave the slave pens, but I needed more time. If I shot, I'd bring the whole place down on me. If I tried to take out a slaver pony with my hooves, I knew he'd be able to call for help before I took him down. So, instead, I decided to hide, slipping into the nearest shack.

I immediately regretted it. The shack was only a few rooms, and from the one upstairs, I could hear what I really hoped was two slaver ponies going at it. I felt both embarrassed and disgusted.

Trying not to make a sound, I looked about for a place to hide. I didn't want to be standing right inside the door if that guard pony decided to take a peek into the shack. I also started peeking in boxes. I knew this was stealing, not just scavenging, but these ponies stole other ponies, so I didn't figure they had any standing to complain.

With screwdriver and booby pin, I didn't even spare the lockbox I found in the next room. Sitting inside, I found something… unique. A little totem. A statuette of an orange pony with yellow mane and tail, poised in mid-buck. What struck me was the three apple cutie mark, identical to the mark on Little Macintosh. I floated it close to read the inscription on the base (Be Strong!) and felt a surge of magical energy.

I'm not sure what it did but… I actually felt stronger! Not just physically, but in confidence. Slipping the statuette into my saddlebags, I finished my looting and…

The door banged open. "There you are!"

I whipped around, sliding into the comfort of S.A.T.S., and fired two shots into the pony – one in the head and one in the chest – before he could reach me to pummel me with his spike-shod hooves.

The sound carried. Immediately, the two ponies above stopped their intercourse and came charging down the stairs. Only one of them had stopped to grab a firearm.

BLAM!! BLAM!! BLAM!!

Little Macintosh roared like thunder. The slaver pony with the gun never even got a shot off. I reloaded as quickly as I could. Luna dammit! Well, I was in it now.

* * *

Fire blasted past me as I dove behind a rock.

A flamethrower! This fucker was attacking me with a flamethrower!

“Oh, I smell roasted pony for dinner,” snarled the slaver with a flamethrower battle saddle. “How about a little barbecue!?” I was seriously hoping he was just being awful, that these ponies weren’t so depraved as to actually *eat* other ponies!

Lightning flashed. Thunder boomed above me. I ran for the cover behind a crazily-tilted boxcar. Flame whooshed out behind me, catching my tail! With a yelp, I thrashed at a nearby puddle with it until the flames disappeared. Ow. Ow. Ow.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Cringing back, I brought out the combat shotgun. Little Macintosh had finally run out of bullets five dead slavers ago. Two of those had been unicorn slavers wielding shotguns, and now I was in no danger of running out of shotgun shells any time soon.

The flamer slaver stepped around the corner and got a faceful. He went down hard.

Swiftly, I took what I wanted from the body, leaving the battle saddle behind. I had neither the natural aptitude nor the professional training to use a battle saddle and I didn’t need that kind of weight slowing me down. I looked around nervously for more attackers.

Including the pony with the flamethrower and the three back in the first shack, I’d put down a total of nine slavers. A lot, but by no means a town’s worth. I was surprised that all the gunfire wasn’t drawing a lot more attention. The thunderstorm might account for much of that, and these guys seemed to have a level of stupefying ego that prevented them from just running to get more help. But there had to be more at play than dumb luck, dumber slavers and the weather!

Battling the slaver guards was pushing me closer to the huge multi-story barn at the heart of town. There was a lot of light pouring out from the windows, and a lot of noise. As I drew closer, I could hear music. I checked my PipBuck, but old Appleloosa appeared out of the range of every station except one, the sprite-bot station. (How that station covered everyplace, I had no idea. Although I suspected the sprite-bots themselves might actually be acting as relays too.) This music, however, was not that music.

Going in the front door would have surely been death. But creeping up the catwalks to a second-floor entrance proved safe. I tried to slip in quietly, but the moment I had cracked the door open, the wind flung it wide with a crash. I cringed. Then poked my head inside. The room was empty. Of ponies, at least. It was crammed with broken furniture and old filing cabinets. Bottle caps, ammo, and packages of cigarettes were in several of the cabinets; they found a new home in my saddlebags. I didn’t smoke, and had no intention of starting. But I could sell the packs to Ditzy Doo, who would resell them to the surprising number of Appleloosians who did.

A door towards the far end opened onto a balcony. From there I could see the manticore's share of the room was a wide open saloon, packed with ponies who were drinking, gambling and watching the performance on a stage directly below me. The balcony ringed the saloon, and there were guard ponies walking around it in a pattern. They were focusing on the chaos below and hadn't spotted me. Yet.

Wait! I… I recognized that voice! Crouching flat on the balcony floor, I poked my head over the edge to see the singer.

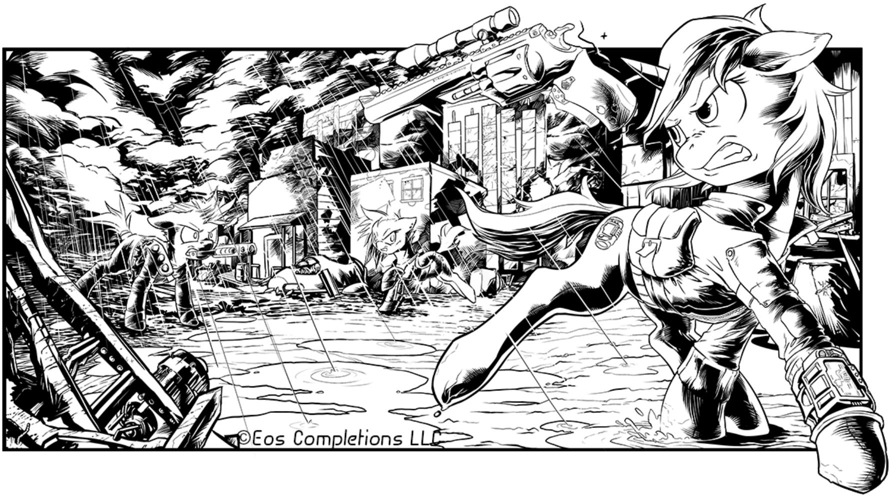
Velvet Remedy!

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Mighty Telekenesis (level two) – You triple the mass that you can levitate with your unicorn magic. Effects are cumulative with Mighty Telekenesis level one, which is required in order to take this perk.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Velvet Remedy



"They actually consider us gods. But then, who can blame them?"

Her!

She was still as beautiful as the first time I saw her. It had been the birthday party for the Overmare's daughter. Velvet Remedy had come in to sing her a stunning revision of the Happy Birthday song. I had been painfully jealous of the filly for weeks after.

Actually, she was even more gorgeous than the last time I saw her. I'd followed her out into this wasteland. To see her now, against this backdrop of rusted metal, old hardwood, bloodstains and liquor – her song so clear and majestic through the din of lowlifes – made her breathtaking in comparison.

My heart fluttered like a butterfly trapped in a jar. Part of me wanted to run to her. Part of me, small but insistent, wanted to be furious with her, to blame her for getting me involved; it didn't matter that the only pony who forced me out of that Stable door was me.

My eyes flickered back to the guards making their rounds. Even if they weren't looking in my direction, in moments they wouldn't be able to miss me. Following either cry of my heart was out. Instead, I scooted back silently, and retreated the way I came.

This threw a new wrinkle in the plan. Now, getting Velvet Remedy out of captivity was my highest priority. Not to suggest the other ponies in those cages were any less important to me. But something personal had been added to the situation. In my head, I entertained the thought of her how happy she would be to see me.

The moment I stepped outside, I knew that I was in trouble. Multiple slaver ponies, lantern poles strapped to their backs, were standing about the corpse of that flamethrower bastard I put down. The wake of my activities was not going unnoticed or ignored. Four of the ponies, those most lightly armed, turned and ran towards the huge central barn. I pressed myself against the wall. The alarm was about to go up!

A single gunshot rang out through the storm, and the lead pony dropped from two bullet wounds. Two of the three runners skidded to a muddy stop and dove for cover, trying to spot their attacker. The third kept running. He nearly made it to the barn – close enough that the barn door was splattered with red when Calamity took him down.

Most of the four more heavily armed slavers spotted Calamity on that last dive and began firing in his direction. But he was fast, the lighting was bad… and I had not been impressed by the aim of slavers yet tonight. I was pleased and utterly unsurprised when the hail of assault rifle ammo thrown in Calamity's general direction missed my companion entirely.

But now, these four were working in a group, moving towards the barn while covering each other. Denying Calamity any safe vector of approach. Moving quickly, I raced down the catwalk and towards one of the old, half-collapsed wooden buildings surrounding the megabarn, combat shotgun reloaded and ready. It was locked.

I spilled several bobby pins and almost fumbled the screwdriver in my haste. The lock was stubborn and tricky, and every failure was making me more jumpy. I desperately wished I had another Mint-al, preferably of the Party Time variety.

The bobby pin broke.

Behind me, the noises from the central barn changed drastically. The singing stopped. And the drunken hollers were replaced by authoritative shouts.

Frantically pulling out another bobby pin, I tried again. I could hear the barn doors swing open, ponicidal slavers tearing out into the storm. Cries for blood and rape and death – and it struck me like a blow to my gut that such vitriol was directed towards me. If these slavers caught me, I'd only *wish* I was a dead pony!

The door's lock finally gave. Without a second to lose, I dove inside.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

Four rapid shots with the combat shotgun, and the slaver guards inside (gambling at a table covered in bottle caps and cigarette butts) went down before they had time to react to my presence. It only hit me a moment later that I had opened fire based solely on what they looked like, what they were wearing, and that they were armed in a place like this. Had I not just done, in essence, what Calamity did when he opened fire on me?

Only I had murdered these two, and even in retrospect had no reason to believe my admittedly fear-fueled instincts had been wrong. One of the dead ponies had a pair of manacles as a cutie mark, and the other had the keys both to the front door and the cage that took up two-thirds of the room.

My eyes widened at what I saw before me. This was not like the cages in the Ponyville Library; there were no prisoners behind these bars. Instead, there were *weapons.* And boxes of ammo, some stacked on top of other boxes of ammo!

I was in the armory!

Two thoughts raced through my mind, each right on the heels of the other: I had just hit the jackpot! And this was probably right where most of the slavers were headed first!

Swiftly, I turned and locked the door. Then began to barricade it. Not too heavily, as trapping myself in here was not going to save anypony, least of all myself. But it would give me time. Time to loot and to consider my next move. A filing cabinet, the table and the metal desk should do. Bottle caps and gaming chits slid to the floor in chaos as I upended the table and place it against the door. I levitated the filing cabinet against it to hold it in place. Then the desk was wrapped with a glow identical to that of my horn as I swung it around. The desk, I noticed, had a glowing terminal. Time allowing, it might be worth it to see what it had to say.

First, however, was improving my armament.

* * *

Seven ammo boxes (half of them locked), two gun cabinets and a weapons locker (also locked) later, I was less like a pony and more like a walking arsenal. There were dozens of weapons, but all in such crappy condition that I was only able to salvage three useful ones out of them including a needler pistol, the repair assist spell of my PipBuck allowing me to swiftly tear down the worst of the weapons for the best of their parts. The weapons locker contained two battle saddles, both far too heavy for me to bother with.

I now had ammo for everything *but* Little Macintosh, including weapons I had never seen before, such as spark packs designed for recharging magical energy weapons, and three missiles. It disturbed me greatly that the slavers had a small stockpile of missiles. Particularly since neither of the battle saddles were built for them.

But by far, the biggest prize in the lot had been neither a weapon nor ammo, but a set of schematics for creating a homemade gun that would fire poisoned needles! It would be silent, crippling and I was pretty sure I'd seen most of the parts required back in Absolutely Everything.

The slavers took little time figuring out I had barricaded myself in their armory. If that gave them pause, however, they didn't show it. Relocking the door had been a useless effort; the first pony to the armory had her own set of keys. The table, cabinet and desk were proving much more worthwhile, and by the time I had finished repairing the weapons I was taking, they had finally ceased bucking their hooves at the door. I had no doubt that they were waiting outside in quiet ambush, but that gave me yet a little more time. I used it to take a look at the terminal. It took almost no time to hack it. The password was "terminal". I was unimpressed.

The first entry was ancient; dating back several years before the apocalypse. The others were all within the last few months.

Entry One:

> Had a surprise inspection from the Ministry of Morale yesterday. We pretty well knew it was coming, and I'd been given instructions on what to do; but I couldn't believe how smoothly it went! We slip them a small percentage of the special product, and they give us clean marks? Even if they were dirty, I couldn't understand why they wouldn't bring the cage down on us and impound all of it for themselves. Seemed too good to be true. So I did a little digging, and a friend of a friend working over at Ironshod who claims to have an inside peek gave me this apple to chew on: according to him, the head mare of MoM herself actually loathes the new contraband laws. And since MoM enforces those laws, that means all sorts of tasty zebra treats are slipping into Equestria right under the Princess's nose. I figure this means as long as she says golden delicious,

we're golden delicious. And even if the Princess suspects her (and how dense would she have to be not to?), she really is the one pony the MoM can't bring up on sedition charges!

Entry Two:

Finally wiped the crap from this terminal. Three-hundred plus documents that I have absolutely no use for (and many of which it's probably best there not be a record of). All except that one damn file from forever ago with the weird-ass flag on it that prevents tampering. And trust me, I've tried.

Don't know why we even bother keeping record of where we send the goods, since they're all going to the same damn place anyway. I don't know what the hell Stern needs all these slaves for, but unless she's building an army, whatever it is has one hellish rate of attrition.

Boss is more worried about the attrition rate in transit. A third of these fuckers don't make the journey, and Stern ain't paying us none for corpses. I'm supposed to figure out a way to keep the damn goods alive at least until after caps exchange hooves. Maybe a cocktail of drugs will help. Found a false floor last week leading into a buried boxcar just full of the stuff!

Entry Three:

I've finally convinced the boss that we need to start a little side business in the foal market. The young ones are easier to corral, control and train. Sure, we have to play up the "investment" angle, since they can't do the work of a normal slave, but there are plenty of ponies out there who see the potential. Unfortunately, Stern ain't one of them. That bitch has no patience.

Turns out, a mixture of Buck and Dash, in small doses, does mighty well in keeping the more worthless slaves from keeling over before they make Fillydephia. What happens to them after Stern gets her hooves on them ain't none of my concern. Still got to talk to Whip Crack about going a bit easier on them though. No drug cocktail is going prevent a pony from being lashed to death. Might suggest swapping out which slaves are pulling the wagons a bit more often too.

Entry Four:

The cells in the old sheriff's station have been perfect for foal holding. The settlers of Appleloosa might have constructed a lot of this place with an eye to speed over lastingness but they sure knew how to make a holding pen. I'd even say that the cells in there are a close second in the list of stuff I'm glad they left behind when they all kicked the bucket, next to that apple pie recipe!

Turns out, gathering foals has made hitting isolated homesteads a much better risk. The parent folk have a tendency to get annoyingly *shooty when we come to claim them, but they also take such great pains to keep their little ones out of the fight that even if we have to kill off all the adults, we still make a good profit.*

Entry Five:

What a fucking cock-up! A whole shipment, two wagons worth, slaughtered. Best we can figure, they ran into a stray hellhound. Damned taint fucks everything up. Now I hear that Stern is sending a "special representative" to take a look-see at our operation. Sounds more to me like she's planning on taking over. I think she's in for a face-buck surprise. And this "special representative" best watch her tail.

Got a new herd of foals ready for breaking. Raked in the caps with the last batch. Another benefit of dealing in foals: you only have to kill one of them in front of the others to take the fight out of them.

Entry Six:

The last week has been beyond words. Stern was playing it close to her chest with that "special representative" business. I never had any idea! Let's just say I was shaking in my shodding when our new boss heard about some of the stuff I'd been saying back when we didn't know her. But I guess it's easy to be understanding when you're connected to the divine! Besides, we still have what's left of the old boss as a reminder that the new boss's hooves ain't soft.

The new acquisition is going to do wonders for keeping the slaves up. Good thing too, since the new boss don't cotton to the Buck and Dash trick. Fortunately, I was able to convince her that was Apple Core's idea. Poor Apple Core. Never saw it coming.

All hail the living Goddess!

By the time I was done reading, I could have set the town on fire with the heat of my seething. Mentally, I was adding the foal cages to my objectives list where it fought with Velvet Remedy for first place. Emotionally, I was seething. I didn't want to be hidden away in a barricaded room anymore. I wanted to go out there and hurt some fucking evil ponies!

Sometimes, the wasteland listens to what you want and gives it to you with all four hooves. I had barely backed away from the terminal, stomping around angrily as I tried to gather enough focus to move the desk, when my barricade exploded inwards with fury and shrapnel! Blood and agony burst from my body as I was thrown back against the wall. My head slammed into the armory cage and for a moment, I lost consciousness. The slavers had launched a missile at the door!

* * *

Trembling with shock and pain, I greedily gulped down another healing potion. Already, my wounds were closing. Calamity held my left foreleg in place so the gash that nearly severed it could do its work. The wound was beyond ugly. Even with the potions, I would be lame until a real medical pony could treat it. Candi seemed horribly far away, and that was assuming she even had the skills.

Fortunately, Calamity calmed me, a missile-launching battle saddle takes some effort to aim correctly, meaning that any pony short of a true expert with the things would be planting herself for each launch. And that made her an easy target. Almost too easy for a shot like Calamity.

When I could stand again, though still wobbly, I hastily filled Calamity in on what I had discovered. He gave me an appraising look as I danced around saying anything about Velvet that would lay bare my heart, then (thankfully) trotted back to take a quick peak at the battle saddles. Neither, he declared at a glance, were sufficiently similar to his own to even raid for spare parts.

We didn't dare spend any further time in the armory. The slavers would be back any moment. We decided to split up. I would look for Velvet Remedy while he hightailed it to the sheriff's office, where he would scout out the place and hopefully take out any guards. I would meet him there soon to unlock the cages, but until then he could rally the foals. Or, at least, give them hope and the first friendly company since being captured.

Slipping out, we parted ways and slid into the storm. The slavers missed us by seconds.

⁂

I quickly slid the boxcar door shut behind me; outside the bright rectangle of light I had opened shrank and vanished back into darkness.

She was here!

"It's about time!" Her tail was to me as she faced a wall with three yellow boxes arranged so their butterflies were in a triangular pattern. "I can't very well do any good sitting in h…"

She had turned a glance towards me and stopped. Now she turned slowly towards me, staring. "Oh… no…"

For the last half-hour, fantasies had played through my head imagining the expression on her face when I found her. The surprise! The joy! This wasn't either.

"Oh, oh dear!" Her eyes traveled from my face to my Stable Two utility barding (still quite recognizable even with Ditzy Doo's improvements) to the PipBuck on my foreleg. Velvet Remedy looked shocked and… sad?

"What are you doing here?" she asked with a breath.

I stood tall. "I followed you out of the Stable. Came across the Equestrian Wastlelands to find you. I'm here to rescue you!" I gave her my best winning smile. Then, worrying at how I might have sounded, I added meekly, "I'm not stalking you."

"Aren't you now." She shook her head and pranced around almost as if distraught. "I tried so hard to keep anypony from following me. This isn't what I wanted at all!" Then she looked at me again, and this time I could tell she was seeing the wounds. And the weapons.

"You're the one out there shooting up everything? You are, aren't you."

Wait… why was I suddenly feeling like I'd done something wrong? "Yes. Like I said, I'm here to rescue you."

"Rescue? Littlepip…" Oh my gosh, she remembered my name! "…I'm not a prisoner.

I'm here of my own volition."

What? *WHAT!??*

"You're… here… with slavers…" I couldn't tell which was breaking faster, my head or my heart. *"You're… working with slavers!?"*

She stared at me, her voice cool. "And you're cutting a bloody swath through them. How many ponies are dead tonight because of you, Littlepip?"

"They're *slavers!!"* I was breathing hard, seeing red.

"And how about the people they support? This is a town, Littlepip. There are merchants and tavern owners and workponies here. Have you killed any of them? Are you sure?

"No, I haven't. I'm sure!" Well, unless the some of the townsfolk wear slaver armor and carry slaver guns and were shooting at me.

"And the slaves? Do you think you can kill slaver ponies and they won't retaliate? Do you think they wouldn't take it out on helpless ponies to make an example?"

Not if we rescue them all first, I thought savagely. But instead of arguing further, I forced myself to be calm. This was Velvet Remedy! I'd give her a chance to explain herself. In as even a tone as I could muster, "Why?"

Velvet Remedy's voice never raised nor wavered. I was near shouting and she was keeping her poise. It made me want to scream even more. "When I left the Stable… after leaving a message to keep anypony from following me," she gave me a pointed look, "I came upon a band of ponies who had been set upon by a horrific beast. There was only one survivor, badly wounded, missing a leg. So of course I galloped to his leg.

"Did you know I always wanted to be a medical pony? I bound his wounds and carried him back to his camp. It was a slaver camp, and there were several ponies there who were in severe need of aid, particularly amongst the captives." Velvet Remedy looked about the boxcar, which I began to realize was not her cell but her room. "I've been with them since."

I just stared. "But… you're helping slavers!"

Velvet Remedy turned away from me, staring at her wall of yellow medical boxes with little pink butterflies. Casually, as if talking about the weather (cloudy with a chance of rain, gunfire and bloody dismemberment), she told me, "I read in a book once, back when I was about your age, that when Fluttershy – the Mare of the Ministry of Peace herself – stepped onto a battlefield, she insisted that her healer ponies tend to everyone wounded on the battlefield. Every*one!* Pony, zebra, to her it didn't matter…"

She turned a level gaze at me and slowly asked, "How could I do any less?"

"It's different!"

"Oh?" she challenged, "How?"

Because these are slavers who are killing people and selling others into slavery and death, even foals! And the zebras were just… the zebras just wiped out our cities. I stomped at the ground. Okay, maybe I didn't have any logical reason why this was any different, but it *felt* different.

"Look," I tried reasonably, "These slaver ponies… when you save one of them, you're making it possible for them to hurt and kill other ponies. Destroy lives. The slaves you heal? They're being sold into horrible work that ends up killing them. The slavers are just using you so those poor ponies survive the trip into hell."

Velvet Remedy looked pained. "You don't think I know that? But else can I do? I'm just one pony. And I will not do nothing! Would you have me just trot away from suffering ponies because they have the misfortune of being captives of slavers?"

Now, finally, I felt the ground reassert itself beneath my hooves. "You can help me rescue them."

She chuckled sadly, shaking her head. "Rescue them? The two of us? Against all those slavers?" She looked me over, "Not that I don't doubt your resolve… or your firepower. But we would be horribly outnumbered…"

I could feel myself grinning, "I'm not alone. We have support. And he's a pegasus!"

Her resistance was crumbling, but still she shook her head. "Even if we did, then what? Did you also bring food enough for the slaves? Water? We are many days trot from the nearest friendly settlement, and many of the poor ponies I have been tending are in no condition to make such a trip. Some of them are foals!"

Her gaze traveled to my lame leg, and her eyes widened. "Oh dear!" She pointed a forehoof. "And it doesn't look like you are in any condition to either. If we had a few hours, I could tend to that, but…"

She sat back, her voice full of regret. "Oh I admire your bravery and sacrifice. But Littlepip, did you really think this through?"

"Of course I thought it through," I stammered a little crossly and mostly honestly. "I have a train!"

"Oh!" Her eyes widened with surprise. And for the first time, her voice was hopeful rather than hurting. "That… might work!"

* * *

Calamity stood guard atop the sheriff's office as Velvet Remedy and I made our way to the cells inside. Nearly half a dozen colts and fillies, reeking of filth and sorrow, looked up at our approach, their eyes fearful. That fear softened as they saw Velvet Remedy, and she smiled gently at them in return. "I have good news, little ponies!" she said softly, hesitating with a grimace before stepping over the headless bulk of one of the guards – Calamity had cleared the way. "We're all going on a train ride!"

I was already at work on the lock of the first cage. I glanced over, admiring how she was with the foals, nuzzling them through the bars. She had been, I could tell, the one good thing in their bleak, awful lives here. My eyes slid down to her flanks, noticing with amusement (not for the first time) that she had two medical boxes strapped to her sides as saddlebags, only now realizing that the scarlet and golden streaks in her hair and tail had suggestive similarity to the pink and yellow that I now associated with the Ministry of Peace. Also: why didn't I think of that? Those metal boxes would provide better protection and added armor for the flanks as well!

The tumblers slid into place, and I pulled open the cage. The little ponies inside looked at me with mixed expressions: joy, hope and a fearful reluctance to let either into their hearts.

"We got incoming!" Calamity's voice broke through the sounds of the rain. "Whoa… Littlepip, we got trouble! Big trouble!"

Velvet Remedy shot me a worried expression, like the hope I had built up in her was shattering. Moving deftly, I snuck up to the nearest window and looked out. Two ponies were striding up toward the sheriff's office, clopping though the small river that the street used to be. A third watched over them from the top of a boxcar, then leapt down to walk between them. The two on either side wore heavy battle saddles, but it was the figure in between that caught my attention.

She was tall, her body exuding a graceful malice and strength I'd not imagined in any pony. In truth, she hardly looked like a pony at all. From her hooves to the long, spiral horn on her head, to her… wings! A winged unicorn!

Awestruck, I drew on the only figures like this in my memory. "c-Celestia? Luna?"

The voice of the mysterious, dark mare carried majestically through the torrent. "We will give you just one chance to come out. Do so. Or We will bring the whole building down on your ears!"

My mind reeled. I felt my hooves stepping forwards, pulling me towards the door. But I stopped as I locked onto one thing my heart insisted to be true: neither Goddess Celestia nor Goddess Luna would support such horrible ponies! Whoever this… creature was, she did not deserve my reverence!

My atheistic friend on the roof had moment of pause. With a yee and a haw, Calamity dived towards the enemy trio, firing twice. Four bullets struck home and the pony to the left of the not-a-goddess fell with a splash, blood washing over the strange mare's hooves and down the river that was Mane Street.

The strange mare responded with a whinnying laugh that had no gentleness of soul. "Such impudence!" I gasped as the mare's horn glowed a sickly green and a blast of lightning ripped from its tip, slamming into Calamity's chest, throwing him back through the sky.

"Calamity!!" I focused desperately, my own horn glowing. Calamity was spiraling down, unconscious, and I barely caught him in time, holding him hovering over the minefield that surrounded the slave pens. His eyes blinked open, then widened with terror as he saw the mines below him, his hooves thrashing in panic as he tried to backpeddle through the air.

"Oh… now isn't that touching!" The mare turned to the slaver pony still flanking her as I glided Calamity to safety. "Kill her." The slaver pony trotted forward, the many barrels of his battle saddle pointed at the age- and weather-weakened wooden structure.

Behind me, I heard Velvet Remedy telling the foals, "Lay flat, all of you. As low as you can!" I turned to see her waving her horn at their cells. And I marveled as a weak, shielding glow wrapped about the cells. Only belatedly did I realize Velvet Remedy had not thought to place herself within the spell of protection she wove around the children.

The roar of the slaver's battle saddle was nothing like the thunder of other guns, but akin to the fury of a dragon! Bullets tore at the side of the building, a great many punching through, perforating the front of the sheriff's office! I dove to the floor behind a metal desk, feeling bullets slice the air just behind me and then ring against the metal as they tried to murder the desk.

I heard Velvet Remedy cry out. I heard her fall.

The roar paused, as if the battle saddle needed to catch its breath. Jumping up from my position, forehooves on bullet-riddled desk, I stared out the window and focused. The glow of my horn matched the glow around one, two, three, four of the mines. I pulled them from the mud and carried them towards our enemies as the minigunner reloaded. The strange mare saw what I was doing, throwing up a wing and enveloping herself with sickly green field of energy, a much brighter and stronger version of Velvet Remedy's protection spell.

The slaver pony turned towards the floating mines the moment they started beeping. He backed up, eyes wide…

BEEP BEEP BEEP ***BOOOOM!!!***

The strange mare's shield wettened with blood and organs. The spell had barely flickered at the force of the onslaught. But… it *had* flickered.

"That was almost impressive," she drolled. "But now playtime is over."

I wasn't paying attention. My eyes were only for Velvet Remedy, who lay in a widening pool of blood. Three of the bullets had struck her, one only grazing but two sunk deep into her belly. As quickly as I could, I opened one of her medical boxes and pulled out a roll of medical bandages.

The door of the sheriff's office ripped off its hinges and went sailing into the darkness. "Go ahead," she taunted, "throw your best spell." No spell came. I had none to throw at her.

"Oh!" she laughed as if she had somehow read my mind. "No spells? Well, aren't you just a *pathetic* excuse for a unicorn!"

I finished binding Velvet as best I could. She stirred, moaning in pain. My heart jumped.

"And here We were hoping that the great assassin who decided to assault *Our town* would at least provide Us with a challenge. We have been so *utterly* bored!"

I focused. My horn began to glow.

"Telekenesis again? Such a foal's game." She was trotting closer, but stopped several yards from the steps. "For the trouble you've caused Us… and worse, for wasting Our time with your patheticness, first We will kill your friends. Then have them chopped up into a nice stew. Which We will feed to you."

My horn glowed brighter. I was beginning to sweat with the effort.

"…No, We think We will instead feed them to the foals, and make you watch!"

The glow of my horn flared, a bright overglow enveloping it. I began to tremble with exertion.

"Still. Not. Impressed." The strange mare's voice was glorious and impossibly jaded. The light from my horn was pouring out the doorway and through the bullet holes of the building, and she couldn't have cared less. "So what's this? Levitating all the little ponies away? You can't send them far enough that We won't catch them. Or maybe you are trying to levitate every gun in the armory? Even if you could, this shield around Us will stop any bullet!"

A second overglow erupted from my horn, enveloping the first. I screamed as the energies burned through me.

The strange mare looked from one side to the other. Turned in place to see if there was anything behind her, but noticed nothing but running water and darkness. Even up, but still saw nothing. "Oh, enough of this!" She turned back to me.

"You're right," I said, stepping feebly into the doorway, the effort draining such energy from me that I feared I would pass out at any moment. "I am small. Weak… pathetic."

My crippled leg was wobbling so hard it made my teeth chatter. My eyes teared from the pain. I kept my head low, horn to the ground. Almost looking worshipful. “I am a sad excuse for a unicorn with no spells but the foal’s cantrip of levitation.” Without raising my horn, I looked into her eyes. This close, my light bathed her. I could see that she was not actually black, but dark forest green in coat, with a mane streaked in green and purple.

“But I’ve gotten really, really good at it.”

Again, the mare looked around casually, trying to guess what I was up to. But I could see just a touch of apprehension in her bored expression. “Well, maybe you are not worthless after all. Give yourself to Us. Join Us in Unity. Become something greater than this wretched thing you are now.”

A third layer of brilliant overglow erupted from my horn. The light was blinding. My lame leg gave out agonizingly, and I dropped to one knee. “No!”

Rearing back with disgust, the mare demanded, “Oh what are you doing?”

I heard Calamity chuckle nearby. “Keeping ya from castin’ a shadow.”

“What?” The mare looked down. Then up a second time, this time seeing the much softer glow coming from above the sheriff’s office. A moment later, the silently gliding boxcar drifted over the roof and stopped above her. Her eyes went wide with comprehension as I let it go.

<<<——======*!!!WHAM!!!* ======——>>>

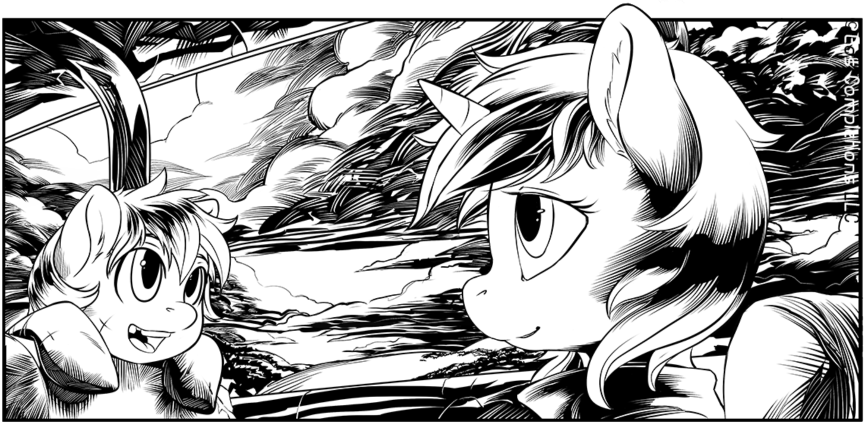
The massive wave splashing out from the impact bowled me over, getting into my nostrils and lungs. I coughed, gasping. I tried to get back to my hooves, but exhaustion smothered me, and I passed out.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Organizer – You are efficient at arranging your inventory in general. This makes it much easier to carry that little extra you've always needed. Items with a weight of two or less are considered to weigh half as much for you.

Chapter Eight

Derailed



"Something tells me this isn't a circus act."

Blood.

It washed around my hooves, splashed against my legs, carried by the river that was Mane Street.

I was standing in the middle of the river, and it was full of corpses.

"How many ponies have you slaughtered?" asked Velvet Remedy's voice accusingly. "It sure didn't take you long to become a mass murderer, did it, Littlepip?"

"v-Velvet?" I looked for her in the storm and blackness. Instead, my eyes found only the bullet-savaged wall of the sheriff's office. Crude spray paint covered it shouting blasphemies. Raiders had been here. Their sickening hoofwork, sadistic mutilations, on display for every pony to see. I watched as the pony torso that dangled from the ceiling inside, its limbs hacked off and coat shaved to the skin, heave against its chains and fall to the floor with a meaty thud.

I tried to scream as it began to crawl towards me!

With a wet rending, the splayed body on the wall, its flesh flayed back to show off its ribs and rotting organs, ripped itself free and sloughed towards me, splashing in the water.

I tried to back away, only to find my hooves mired in the muddy street! The crimson ichor in the water coated my PipBuck and sunk into my coat around my legs. "Calamity! Velvet? Help me!" I screamed, but my voice carried no sound.

A silent sprite-bot watched, doing nothing, as the lower half of a slaver pony joined the things that crept maliciously towards me, a long rope of intestine dragging out behind it.

I awoke, my heart thudding hard and my body covered in cold sweat, to the sound and shake of the train. I was weak, but warm and less achy than I had any right to be. I was laying in one of the beds on the train's passenger car, a blanket over me. Beside me, Velvet Remedy was waving her horn tenderly over my recently crippled leg. To my amazement, my leg felt mended, if deeply itchy.

I tried to shake the specter of my nightmare. This was not the first sleeping terror that my experiences outside had spawned, but this had been the most deeply unpleasant. The incorporation of my companions, or lack of them, somehow made this dream far, far worse.

Velvet Remedy! The last I had seen her, she was fallen in a pool of her own blood, having saved nearly half a dozen foals…

My ears perked at the sounds around me; looking over my shoulder, I saw the colts and fillies from the sheriff's cells taking up much of the passenger car. They looked weary and beaten; two of them were fast asleep, but one had enough cheer to look at me and grin. "That was awesome!" The colt waved his hoof slowly through the air then stamped it down with a clop.

I gave him a weak smile, my heart finally beginning to calm. Calamity turned from staring out a window to welcome me back to the land of the living.

"We're… okay?" I was hesitant, half-fearing that this was just another dream waiting to become a nightmare. Velvet Remedy nodded reassuringly.

"The slaves?"

"In the caboose," Velvet said softly. Less softly, "This train only has the one passenger car, and I felt the foals needed the space more dearly. So it was either the caboose or strapping them to a flatcar."

Speaking as though I would have suggested something awful was not, I decided, one of her more endearing personality traits.

Suddenly, I remembered my original plan, and the locked pens that the ponies captives had been caged in. "But the locks…?" I knew Calamity could not have picked them, and I couldn't imagine Velvet Remedy, in her own youth, having plied that skill.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Oh come now. I'm not the locksmith you are, and I certainly do not have the level of telekinetic mastery that you showed – most impressive, I should add – but I *am* a unicorn! I can do basic levitation. Between your missiles and the mines, I was able to… bypass the need for lockpicks or keys."

The train rumbled around us. Glancing out my window, I saw that we had already traversed the desert and were clearly well on our way up the mountain. The pace of the train ponies was slowing; we were getting close to the peak-point of the mountain track. My conversation with Velvet had lulled, and now Calamity disrupted it completely.

"Our shadow's back."

I pulled myself into a sitting position, testing my mended leg. "Shadow?"

The colt who spoke up earlier declared, "Mister Calamity thinks something is following us." I noticed Calamity was crouched to the window, looking upwards through it… towards the sky?

"Another…" I kept myself from saying 'goddess' in reference to the winged unicorn slaver I had battled. "…one of those… like at the sheriff's?"

"Ah don't think so. But there's a'somethin' up there. Keepin' just out of sight."

"If it's out of sight, how do you know there is anything there?" Velvet countered. But at Calamity's look, she relented. "Another pegasus, perhaps?"

Calamity grimaced. "Ah… really don't think so." He returned his gaze to the window, quieting.

"At least it has stopped raining," Velvet Remedy announced, looking out the window. "That storm lasted for *days.*"

I turned and looked out at the thick grey cloud cover. The water had indeed stopped falling from the sky, and the clouds were a much lighter color, turning the sunlight a drab grey.

"Velvet…" I started.

She smiled at me, and my heart soared, her previous grating remark instantly forgotten. "Thank you, Littlepip. Your bandages saved my life."

I looked at her, knowing that there was no way those poor excuses for medical aid, magically treated or not, could have brought her to health. I started to say as much but she lifted a hoof to interrupt. "No, but you managed just well enough that I regained consciousness, and from there I could take care of myself," She cast a sidelong look towards Calamity. "Not to mention you and that interesting friend of yours."

Calamity nickered in her direction.

I stared at my leg, surprised. Grinning, Velvet reminded me, "I did tell you I'd always wanted to be a medical pony. I studied for it and even apprenticed."

I looked at the beautiful mare, many years my elder, curiously. "If that's what you wanted, why didn't you?"

"Because my cutie mark showed up. One day, I sang a song for an ailing gentlepony, and it appeared. A songbird, a nightingale to be precise. And when your cutie mark appears, your place in the Stable is decided." There was a sad matter-of-factness in her voice. It was a truth I knew too well.

"I even begged the Overmare. But clearly it was to be my destiny to be an entertainer, my fate was written on my flanks. My voice was the most beautiful in the Stable, and I could not deny that I could sing. Or that I even enjoyed it a fair bit. The Overmare even showed me my geneology, proving that I was the many-times-great granddaughter of Stable Two's first Overmare, who herself was also a legendary singer."

I nodded, having heard the heartwrenching music myself while in Turnpike Tavern.

"How could I fight the weight of all of that? The Overmare… she graciously allowed me to indulge my hobby in the small times when it wouldn't interfere with my new duties of uplifting the Stable's flagging morale. But my dreams, I was told, were not for me."

Suspecting the answer, I had to ask the question: "Velvet, why did you leave the Stable."

Velvet whinnied demurely. "Again because of my cutie mark." She turned, pulling away one of the medical boxs to show me the nightingale on her flank. Wings outstretched, beak open in song.

"Do you see what it is not, Littlepip?"

I saw what it was. What it had always been. A bird of beautiful song.

"It is not a bird in a cage," Velvet Remedy said, her voice pleased. "And if it is not, then I was not meant to be either. Come horror or ill, I needed to be free."

* * *

"Ah'm gonna talk a walk outside, maybe stretch muh wings."

I looked up from the book I was reading to pass the time. (Turns out, *Equestrian Army Today* was all about battle saddles.) The train was slowing to nearly a stop. The engine had already crested the peak, and the train ponies were drawing the rest of the train down over the lip and around the next bend before releasing it and jumping aboard themselves. There wasn't going to be another chance to get some fresh air… or for Calamity to get himself a better look at our shadow.

I nodded, bidding him go. Velvet Remedy was probably on her way back from the caboose; she had been making regular checks on the adult ponies we had rescued, and I was entertaining taking a quick trot myself once she was here to watch the foals.

I waited, time seeming to have slowed to a crawl like the train itself. She was taking her sweet time – had she possibly gotten lost? No, that was silly; you couldn't get lost on a train, could you? I chuckled as I realized that, if I ever got lost on the train, my PipBuck's automap spell would guide me. Poor Velvet, however could she find her way on a train without it?

I had offered Velvet Remedy her PipBuck; but to my shock she had refused it. I stressed how unbelievably useful a tool it was in the Equestrian Wasteland. She said I could keep it as a gift. And as an apology for having given it to me in the first place. She didn't blame herself for my leaving the Stable, but she regretted having played a hoof (and truthfully a whole pony) in my decision.

I had tried one last time, and she had finally told me flatly, "I escaped that prison, I will not wear its shackle. No matter how gilded a shackle it might be." At that, she had left to check the ponies in the caboose.

I was brought out of my reverie by the draconic roar of minigun fire. Followed by the death screams of the train ponies.

A mere second later, I heard the switch pulling team (who were currently acting as guards) open fire in return.

The foals began to panic. I was attempting to calm (or at least corral) them when Velvet Remedy returned through the back door, looking worried. At nearly the same moment, one of the train ponies from the switch team burst in, shouting and waving his paws, a lever-action shotgun floating by his side. "Slaver ambush! Protect the children!"

What?! How could they have gotten ahead of us?!

Before I could ask, a grisly pony wearing slaver armor, spiked hooves coated in the blood of train ponies, broke into the passenger car and reared up, intending to end the life of another. I didn't have time to think; I just drew my assault rifle and fired at him. The train pony ducked, his own gun swinging around and unloading into the slaver. I couldn't tell whose shot felled him.

Flashes of my nightmare came back to me. I hesitated, but mercifully only after the attacker had been taken down. Then with a stomp I activated my E.F.S. and watched the flurry of red marks fill my forward compass, milling about the few friendlies that were in front of me.

I turned to Remedy, levitating out the needler gun and fitting it with a marked clip. I had not been able to determine what the markings on the needle clips stood for, but I suspected any one of them would be at least capable of incapacitating. “Take this. Guard the foals with your life. I’m going to help up ahead!” Better to take them down before they got back this far, if I could.

Velvet Remedy stared at the needler pistol as if it was diseased. “I… couldn’t.”

Oh for Celestia’s sake. “You have to! You’re not going to survive out here if you aren’t willing to fight back.” I pointed towards the foals. “And neither will the ones you’re protecting.”

Velvet gulped. “I mean… I don’t know how!”

Oh! “It’s easy. Float it up, pointing this end at the bad guy. To shoot, pull this little lever back; that’s the trigger.”

She nodded. Then looked to me as if hoping I would offer another option. “I’m not a killer. I… I don’t think I can!”

“Learn to.” It was a harsh, even brutal, thing to say. But that was the Equestrian Wasteland.

* * *

The train slid down the track, picking up speed but still slow enough for the motley force of unicorn and earth pony slavers to leap aboard. Two earth ponies with minigun battle saddles had torn through the pulling team, shredding the poor ponies into red meat. The barrage of return fire had slaughtered them in return.

I stood my ground on a boxcar several cars forward of the passenger car that held Velvet Remedy and the foals, assault rifle at the ready. My E.F.S. compass was so full of red ahead of me that it was impossible to track individual opponents. Part of me wanted to attempt parley, if only to avoid the growing pain in my conscience. But that was out of the question. No, any pony attacking the train went down. It was with this intention firmly planted that I opened fire on the first slaver to jump her way onto the boxcar ahead of me. My shot went wild and she jumped back down. Dammit!

I heard an explosion above and behind me. Casting my eyes to the sky, I saw Calamity dodging and weaving through the air, a griffin in hot pursuit. The enemy aviator held a brush gun, a much nastier firearm than any I had seen so far, and occasionally slowed his pursuit of Calamity to fire a shot. Calamity, bless him, was not making himself an easy target, and costing the griffon distance with each failure.

As I watched, Calamity suddenly swooped upward, pulling a full loop… and to my dismay the griffon matched his move, looping slightly inside his own to close distance with him yet again!

I heard clopping coming closer, but as I turned my attention back to the boxcars ahead, I saw nothing. Confused, I took a step towards the edge, looking down to see if they were racing up along the ground…

…only to find three slaver ponies racing along the side of my boxcar, passing me! Somewhere, a slaver unicorn was aiding them with spells! A magic glow held their hooves to the side of the moving train. “Luna rape you with her horn!” I growled, feeling incensed at the magical trickery, and swung about the assault rifle, firing into their hindquarters, flanks and necks as they raced down the next boxcar towards the passenger car. Two ponies screamed as they fell from the train, mortally wounded, one breaking his neck in the fall; but the third made it to the gap between cars before I could bring my weapon to bear on him.

The train was moving at a fair clop now. I raced along the roof jumping to the next car and skidding to a stop. I looked down between the cars, and quickly pulled my head back as the slaver spotted me and fired a mouth-held submachine gun into the air where my head had just been.

Focusing, I pulled the wide-eyes slaver up out of his hiding space. Then something hit me from behind, sending a stripe of searing pain up my back! I dropped him, the damnably lucky bastard falling safely onto the roof just across the gap. I was surrounded now; the pony I had missed before had come up behind me while I was focused on this new one, a whip clinched in her mouth that she wielded with hellish accuracy. With a crack of her whip, she knocked my assault rifle out of the air, the weapon sailing out over the cliff face the track was skirting. The SMG slaver had taken my moment of surprise to reload, and now grinned; in his mind, he had already killed me.

Another explosion from above, and two bullets ripped through the slaver, felling him. His body, SMG still clenched in his teeth, slid off the boxcar roof. A moment later, Calamity swooped low over the boxcar and banked sharply, his hooves scraping along the cliff that rose up above us on the other side of the train. The griffon swooped over the train in pursuit. I ducked. The whip-pony wasn't quick enough and got clipped by one of the griffon's wings, the hit cleanly decapitating the slaver pony. I felt my heart skip a beat as I saw the blades that adorned the forward edge of the griffon's wings.

Scooping up the decapitated pony's whip, I kicked the rocking head off the side of the train. I curled the whip into my saddlebags, brought out my combat shotgun and moved, first to one side of the boxcar then the other. The spell the slavers were using changed the situation dramatically, and I was painfully worried about how many had gotten past me before I wised up to it.

Further up the train, I heard more gunfire as the remaining train ponies fought for their lives. Down the train, I thought I heard Velvet Remedy scream! I turned towards the sound, my hindquarters to the front of the train when something thumped hard somewhere towards the front of the train, and then the train gave a shudder as its wheels crunched through a body that had fallen down onto the tracks.

Calamity landed deftly beside me.

I stared at him in surprise, and he seemed to blush as he hoofed at his mane. "Ah'm 'fraid Razorwing couldn't join us. He refused t' get offa muh tail. Even when Ah swooped between two of the cars." Calamity smiled, looking around as if trying to find a missing friend. "Ah swear, he was right behind me just a moment ago!"

I smirked. Then pointed a hoof towards the passenger car. "Go help Velvet!"

Calamity nodded and took to the air, not even needing to fly as the now galloping train brought the passenger car right to him. I saw him disappear into the gap in front of it, then and galloped to the aid of the train ponies. As I did so, a frightened voice in my head asked me what my life had become, what *I* was becoming, that there were so many ponies who wanted to take my life, and that I was charging *towards* them?

The last survivor of the train ponies and I raced across the rooftops and dived down into the open door of the passenger car as twin beams of pink magical energy zorched the sky, fired from a white unicorn raider's battle saddle. The train pony who had been with us seconds ago was now nothing but sparkling pink ash blowing away in the wind.

The passenger car was empty! Sort of. The body of a black-coated slaver hung from the ceiling, filled with needles. The spell on its hooves was keeping it from falling to the floor, even after death. It gave the earth pony with me quite a start. To be honest, I might have shrieked just a little too.

"Ah tell ya, I prefer slavers who shoot bullets!" the train pony gasped, recovering. "Ya can't wrap a bandage around bein' turned t' dust!"

I quite thoroughly agreed.

Velvet Remedy ran in through the back door, coming off the flatcar behind. Seeing the train pony, she motioned for him to head behind her. "Please, go meet up with Calamity! He's at the caboose!"

"We've got a nasty one on the way," I warned her. "And another four coming behind her. I think these are the last of them, but one is using a battle saddle with magical energy weapons!"

Velvet Remedy nodded warily, then looked up and pointed at the corpse above. "t-This one came in on the roof! L-like an *insect!"* She was clearly shaken, more at having to take a life than the strangeness of the circumstances, but I suspected she couldn't bring herself to focus on that. Not yet. I began to wonder if her occasional unpleasantness wasn't part of some coping mechanism for dealing with the horrors of the Equestrian Wasteland.

The earth pony trotted past her, reloading his weapon and bucking the door closed behind him.

A minute later, Calamity galloped up. "Everypony's in the caboose and Ah've kicked it off! The slavers won't be gettin' t' them from here!" He lowered his head and stomped at the floor. "Here's where we hold the line!"

There was no time for discussion. Calamity had barely spoken his intent when three slavers, lead by the unicorn pony, came into the car at us. Not from in front or behind, but through the windows! The passenger car exploded into violence.

S.A.T.S. locked onto the slaver coming through the window on my left. At this range, I could hardly miss. Unfortunately, neither could they! Velvet Remedy's horn glowed as I fired into the chest of my first target, once and again. His armor stopped much of the damage, but it knocked him back, his own shot grazing my cheek. I turned to the second, but not quickly enough to stop him from swinging his magically enhanced sledgehammer right into my ribcage! The pain was blinding! I could hear ribs snapping under my armor!

My squeal of pain did not stop him from bringing down a second blow across my back. Ditzy Doo's armor dissipated the blow across my body, saving me from a broken back and a very short, paralyzed life.

Calamity had fired off a double-shot from his battle saddle, tearing gaping holes in one of the slaver ponies coming in on his side. Bloody innards splattered across the bed, wall and window.

The last went for Velvet Remedy. Oh Goddess, why wasn't she wearing armor? I watched in horror from the floor as the slaver sank his combat knife deep into her shoulder, barely missing her neck. Blood gushed around the blade and turned her charcoal coat a wet black. Her spell imploded, the magic radiating from her horn fading away in an instant.

I started to get up, crying out again as bright agony slashed through me with fiery fingers. My targeting spell was still refreshing, but my first opponent had already recovered and was bringing his gun to bear. The pony with the sledgehammer swung again, intent on pummeling me into submission: the submission of a corpse.

Calamity fired. The armor that had spared the slaver from my combat shotgun was not equal to my companion's powerful rifles. The slaver who had stabbed Velvet grasped the hilt of the knife in her teeth, intent on pulling the blade out of the wounded singer, but Velvet's horn glowed once again, a telekinetic light enveloping the knife. It was simple, weak telekinesis, holding the blade. But it kept the pony from sliding out the blade as easily as she expected, and that briefest pause gave Calamity enough time to turn his barrels on her. He fired again, and Velvet was splattered with wet bits of the other pony.

I was in so much pain; my vision blurred heavily. I was having trouble drawing breath. But at least now, it was (I thought hopefully) only three-on-one. But as the slaver raised his sledge hammer over my head, the door burst open. The white unicorn, standing just outside the door, opened fire with pink magical energy.

With a flash from my horn, sledgehammer pony found himself pushed away, becoming an impromptu shield. An eyeblink later, he was glowing pink dust.

Now it really was three-on-one. And while I had to fight through my pain to fire, my targeting spell had finally returned and S.A.T.S. guided my shots. And Calamity needed no aid at all.

* * *

Velvet Remedy's horn glowed as she slowly mended my several broken ribs, jumping slightly as the train gave a buck. The pain in my side had reduced to a throbbing, bad enough to wring whimpers from me. "Really, Littlepip, this is becoming a habit." Her own coat was matted with her blood. The last of our healing potions had been consumed and both she and I wore the last of our bandages. Only Calamity had made it through virtually unscathed.

The slavers lay dead about us, save for the one who had pummeled me with a sledgehammer. His body had been vaporized – turned to glowing ash. I recoiled at the thought that I might have breathed in some of him.

I turned away, staring at the floor. Though we had won, it didn't feel like a victory. Instead, I felt that I had lead half a dozen train ponies to their slaughter. And, in the end, I had failed in the fight as well. If Calamity hadn't been with us…

Reading me far too easily, Velvet Remedy tried to soothe me. "At least you got that one with the horrible sledgehammer. All I managed to do was be a target."

"You are doing more than your share with your healing skills and mending spell," I pointed out, adding, “Although I’m surprised you didn’t stay with the freed slaves and foals.”

Velvet Remedy whinnied. “That caboose was too crowded as it was. If I’d have tried to force myself in there too, somepony would have suffocated!” She finished tending my wounds, frowning at the increased shaking of the train. Scenery flashed by outside the windows.

“Ayep,” Calamity returned to us, making his way through the rattling train, “Looks like that was the last of them.”

The train groaned dangerously as it tore around a corner, forcing us to catch ourselves. Velvet looked between us with alarm. “Don’t either of you ponies think we’re going awfully fast? How does this train of yours slow down?”

“We use the brakes.”

“And where are they?”

“In the caboose.”

Velvet’s ears dipped back. She stared levelly at Calamity. “The caboose? That would be the big red car at the back, right? The one you just kicked free of us?” I felt a surge of panic.

Calamity grimaced a little. “Ayep.” Pondering, “Y’know, that would explain the look the train pony was givin’ me.”

“I begin to see how you got your name,” Velvet said flatly.

Several minutes of confirming our situation and arguing what should be done followed as the train continued to race down the mountain out of control; soon the three of us were bracing ourselves against every turn. We were still only halfway down, sheer cliffs flying by on either side. In the end, I decided there was only one solution.

“Calamity, fly Velvet Remedy to safety!”

Velvet’s eyes widened, “But what about you?”

Resolutely, I stomped on the ground, trying to ignore the twinge in my recently mended leg and ribs. “I’ll be fine. I’ve figured out another way off.”

The two of them looked dubious. But they trusted me. So with a nod, Calamity and Velvet made their way to the nearest flatcar. “Ah’ll be back for you!” Calamity promised as he spread his wings. The wind tore Calamity and Velvet off into the air.

And then I was alone. On a runaway train!

Okay, I thought to myself. Now it was time to actually think of a way off. The train charged forward towards a mountain curve, hitting it far too fast! The train tilted; I could feel wheels coming off the track!

My horn flared with power, cold sweat breaking across my already too-abused body as I poured telekinetic power into holding the train on the track. The whole train glowed feebly as it ripped around the corner, canted crazily, riding only one side of its wheels!

With a squealing thud, the train righted itself on the track, already headed towards another turn, this one throwing the train’s weight against the rising cliff wall. The rocky wall raked at the train, gouging at boxcars and rending most of the roof off the passenger car with a resounding roar. I clenched my eyes against the storm of splinters.

When I opened them again, wind was buffeting me fiercely through the gaping wound in the train car. I could see another turn ahead, this one even sharper. Trembling with exhaustion, I knew there was no way to prevent the train from leaping the track this time.

I focused again, dreaming I could levitate myself to safety. Groaning with the effort, I felt my hooves leave the ground just at the engine car hit the curve and snapped around it. The massive weight of the train could not follow. With a horrific, screaming shudder, the jackknifing train tore from the track, soaring out over the mountain cliff like a snake with a broken head, and plunging towards the valley over a thousand feet below!

With all my remaining focus, I pushed myself up and away, lifting out of the open roof… but it was not enough. I was still falling, and fast! My efforts only slowed me enough that I got to see the train fall past me, diving down into the dead forest below with an almighty crash. The destruction below me was like the hoof of Luna against the land beneath. Great clouds bellowed up, obscuring the wreckage that I was about to splatter against.

Calamity caught me!

* * *

The three of us – Calamity, Velvet and I – trod through the narrow valley under the grey clouds above. I had no idea where we were, save that New Appleloosa was many days travel on my PipBuck's map. Assuming we could travel in anything close to a straight line. Assuming we were headed there at all.

Based on the terminal entries, the slavers of old Appleloosa were selling the bulk of the ponies they captured to somepony named Stern in someplace called Fillydelphia. I had not lost my rage at what I had read, at the wicked and cruel things these ponies were doing. I kept it at a low simmer in the back of my mind. If I had my way, Fillydelphia was next. But I could not ignore our more pressing concerns.

We were in desperate need of medical supplies. Likewise, the water and food Calamity and I had packed was insufficient to support three ponies for several days. We needed safe shelter and resupply.

Once together, we had rested for several hours. The three of us had just been through a harrowing battle, and it would have been insane, if not impossible, to press on without giving ourselves time out. In truth, we needed much more than we took – I myself was so weakened by my extreme feats of telekinesis that I found myself unable to levitate even something as small and relatively light as Little Macintosh – but the unfamiliar and possibly hostile environment did not encourage dallying.

The valley was strewn with black, dead trees and bits of debris. Not from the train, whose crash site was now miles behind us; these told of the devastation of Equestria's apocalypse. Fallen sky chariots and similar vehicles marred the land. According to Calamity, we were below the outskirts of what had once, high above us, been the pegasus city of Cloudsdayle. Now, there was nothing up there above the clouds. And on the ground, the only grave marker for the sudden ending of so many pony lives were the scattered wrecks of pegasus vehicles that had been too far from the city to be instantly consumed, but not far enough to save those pulling them.

Inappropriately upbeat music (heavy on the tuba) floated like a siren song through the valley. My ears perked, and I began galloping towards the source, my surprised companions scrambling to follow suit.

"Littlepip!" Velvet gasped, "What is it?" Calamity was no less confused; he knew the sound of a sprite-bot, but could fathom no reason I would be in such a hurry to catch it.

Reaching the sprite-bot, I enveloped it with my horn's magic, dragging it to attention before me. "Watcher!"

Calamity landed, looking at me strangely. Velvet, considerably further behind, dropped to a trot as she saw no sign I was in immediate danger of being crippled yet again.

"Watcher!" I shouted crossly, giving the annoying sprite-bot a firm shake, as if doing so would shut off the music and summon my cryptic acquaintance. "Watcher, I know you can hear me! I need you right now!"

"Littlepip," Calamity began slowly. "Ah don't think…" He stopped, eyes widening fearfully as the music ended in a mid-song pop and the sprite-bot spoke directly to me in a voice he had never heard come from a sprite-bot before.

"uh, hello, Littlepip. How can I help you?" The tinny, artificial voice addressing me clearly spooked my wasteland-experienced companion quite deeply.

"I need you to send a message to New Appleloosa!" I waved a frantic hoof. "There's a caboose headed down the mountain, without a train. The train pony inside will make sure it reaches the bottom safely, but there are lots of ponies inside, including five young ones, who cannot survive out here on their own. New Appleloosa needs to send wagons to get them."

Watcher was silent, hesitant.

"Watcher, they're not in good shape. They have no food or water. Time is of the essence!"

Watcher spoke slowly, "I don't know, Littlepip. I'm not in the habit of…"

"I. Don't. Care!" I shouted crossly. "You care about those ponies, don't you? Do you want to see those foals die?!"

"No! I mean, yes, I care. No, I don't want to…"

"Then get help! You don't have time to indulge your shyness, Watcher. Lives are at stake!"

With a pop, the sprite-bot's song continued. I released it, unsure whether to feel relieved or disgusted.

"Littlepip," Velvet nickered, clopping up to me. "If you keep ordering your friends around, you'll soon find you don't have any."

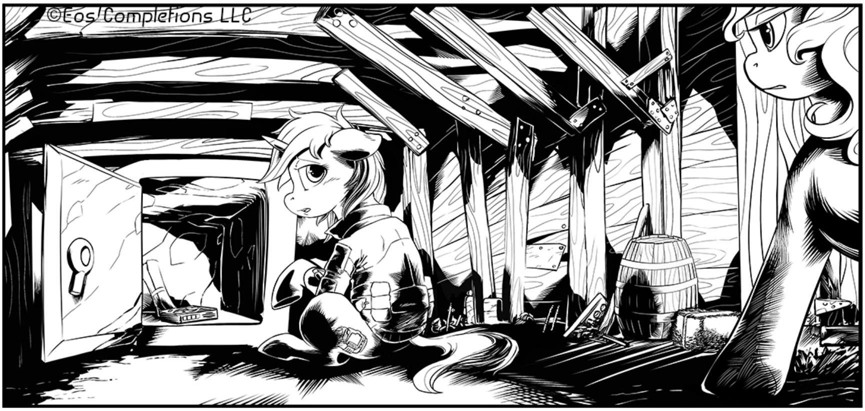
I frowned, reminded suddenly of my friendless nightmare. Calamity gave me a look that suggested she might be right. Velvet kept walking, and I fell in line behind her.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Light Trot – You are agile, lucky and always careful; or maybe you have just mastered the art of self-levitation. Either way, you never set off enemy mines or floor-based traps.

Chapter Nine

The Moral of the Story



"I'm the one who should be mobbed by strangers wherever I go!"

Clouds.

When I first stepped outside into this new world, the world was impossibly big, the sky terrifyingly high. Now, the omnipresent clouds – shifting, boiling, darkening with rain – was just another ceiling. Grey, like the one in Stable maintenance. Only rarely, like on that first night, would small fissures open in the cloud cover, like gaping wounds that would slowly heal. The tantalizing glimpse of a bright, wondrous blue above, cheerful and serene, tempted and tortured those living in the gloom below.

"Littlepip," Velvet asked, her own thoughts not far from my own, "Does the air seem strange to you outside? The day is so warm and bright, and yet the air is… sickly. I feel so eager and yet so hesitant to be enwrapped by it."

"Like it's poisonous," I agreed. Calamity said nothing. I supposed that to him the air was the air and had always been like this.

The strewn wreckage of pegasus vehicles, cast from the sky when the metropolis of Cloudsdayle was obliterated in a single hoofstomp, stretched on for miles. Some of the sky chariots and wagons were marred further with the old skeletons of the poor ponies who were struck dead or mortally wounded by the megaspell, but whose bodies were not wiped from existence entirely.

The mountains rose up to either side of the valley, sickly grass forested with blackened trees. New plants grew around them, feeding on their corpses. Up and ahead was the worn and faded image of a giant Sparkle-Cola bottle, the stylized carrot immediately identifying the drink even though the words on the sign had faded too severely to read. A badly faded yellow pony with a pink mane was holding it aloft in nearly orgasmic glee. According to Calamity, these giant signs, called billboards, had once littered every major skyroute between Cloudsdayle and other cities, advertising goods and services from all over Equestria. I could spot a second billboard on the opposite side of the valley perhaps half a mile further down. Even from this range, I thought I could recognize the familiar image of heroic pegasi with rainbows exploding across the sky behind them as they swooped over the armies of wicked zebras. Better Wiped Than Striped.

A large, enclosed delivery wagon lay battered, bent and sunken partially into the ground. I spotted on its side what appeared to be a business logo – a pattern of seven ascending circles – which struck me as strangely familiar. I didn't have to ponder it long, for as we drew closer, my PipBuck's automap christened it: Wreckage of Ditzy Doo Deliveries. Now I remembered where I had seen the pattern before – on the interior title page of The Wasteland Survival Guide.

Calamity was looking at the wreckage with similar comprehension. Velvet looked between us, confused at why we had stopped to stare. "What?"

"This is where Ditzy Doo fell," I said, feeling awe and intense sadness. This… this would have been her only grave marker, had she not suffered a stranger fate.

"Who?"

"Ditzy Doo," I repeated, lost in my own thoughts. I was trying to imagine what it had been like. Velvet, who did not know the name, gave me a look indicating just how helpful she felt that answer was, and turned to Calamity.

"Ayep."

Velvet nickered and walked past, circling around the back. Moments later, I heard her call out, "Littlepip, would you please come look at this?" Her voice had a tone of… hope? I trotted around to find her (not at all like a little puppy at her owner's call).

Boxes and crates littered the ground around the back of the Ditzy Doo Deliveries wagon, and many more were toppled and crushed inside. Some had been torn open, all had been looted for anything of value. Except, that was, for a safe and a footlocker in the back. It was the latter which had drawn Velvet's excitement because, while identical in make to every other footlocker I had run across, the markings were very distinct: three bands of yellow, the center one with a pink butterfly emblem. This was not a medical box, but the colors and symbol were clearly those of the Ministry of Peace.

"Sure, no problem," I announced proudly, floating out my screwdriver and bobby pin as I watched Velvet struggling not to prance in anticipation. Turning away, I started on picking the lock on the safe first. I could hear her stomp her hoof, and bit my lower lip to stifle a laugh.

The safe's lock gave up almost too easily. Considering the level of looting, I was surprised that such a weak lock had been such a long-lived deterrent. Was I the only one outside who had developed this skill? I opened the safe.

One item inside immediately captured my attention. The entire interior of the safe was filled with a rosy glow emanating from a bottle of luminescent purplish-red liquid:

Sparkle~Cola
RAD!
With an invigorating touch of radiation and a blast of radish flavoring!
(It's like a buck to the face! With radishes!)

The Sparkle~Cola RAD floated out of the safe past me, enveloped in a magical glow by Velvet's horn. Raising the bottle to eye level, she winced at it with a disparaging gaze.

"That's insane. How could any pony be so stupid as to think consuming *radiation* is *healthy?*"

My own levitation abilities had been so overstrained that it actually took effort to snatch the bottle back, but I proudly kept myself from panting. Velvet Remedy stared in something approaching horror as she saw me slip the bottle into one of my saddlebags.

"You're not actually intending to *drink* that, are you?"

I shrugged. It did sound like it might be tasty; and according to my PipBuck, the radiation still present was minor enough to be washed away with a RadAway potion later. I turned to the footlocker, prompting Velvet to forget (or at least ignore) the beverage in my saddlebags.

This lock was *not* easy. It selfishly refused to give up its secrets. After the third try, I began to worry that this one was beyond me. And I desperately didn't want Velvet Remedy to see me fail. I had one other option… but I didn't want her to see that either. "This is a tough one… I'm going to need concentration. Velvet, could you step out?" And, considering her warning earlier, I added, "Please?"

I could tell she didn't want to, but with ladylike grace, she departed. As soon as she was out of sight, I brought up my PipBuck's sorting spell, and pulled the tin of Mint-als out from where I had hidden it at the bottom of my pack. This wasn't the incredible Party-Time treat I had before, but I didn't need to talk to the locker. Opening the tin, I popped one into my mouth and began to chew.

The effect was immediate. It was like a grey film was being washed away from all my senses, like my mind was clearing after having been in a deep fog! I was more alive and aware than ever before! This was not Party-Time, and definitely not as candy-licious, but it was enough to make the damn lock sing for me!

Outside, I could hear Velvet Remedy's voice: "Calamity, may I ask you something?"

"Ayep, Ah reckon you can."

"Why is it that you are the only pegasus pony I've seen in the Equestrian Wasteland? I was under the impression that pegasus ponies should be as common as earth and unicorn ponies."

My ears perked. Their conversation wasn't meant to be private, so this wasn't eavesdropping exactly. And I had to admit, I wanted to know that too.

There was a pregnant pause. Then Calamity nickered, "Wow, lady, when ya ask a question, ya go right for the throat, don't ya."

"I'm sorry. I apologize if this is a personal…"

"No, no. Ya should know, Ah guess." I could hear Calamity sigh; my perceptiveness was heightened to an amazing degree! As I had predicted, the lock was now easy, and clicked open in surrender.

"Ya ain't gonna find any other pegasus ponies. Not unless they're… like me." He paused as if speaking about this was physically taxing. "Ya see, back durin' the war, we pegasus ponies were Equestria's greatest fighting force. We were the elites! The best of the best! But after Cloudsdayle was hit, well… that was it, game over. They abandoned the war, abandoned Equestria… although it's not like either one of 'em lasted more'n a few hours past that anyways. The pegasus ponies closed up the sky an' went inta hidin'."

"Closed. Up. The sky?"

"Ayep. They kicked the cloudmakers up t' full power an' locked 'em like that. Saved their other cities, their families. The zebras couldn't well target what they couldn't see. Not that they didn't try. Got a few lucky hits, but not many." I could hear one of them dig at the ground with a hoof. "Ain't been a day that ain't been at least mostly cloudy in Equestria since."

Velvet Remedy gasped. "That… that's horrible!"

"Oh, they keep tellin' themselves tha' any day now, they'll turn 'em off, open the sky, come swoopin' down t' save the rest of ya. When they're ready. When the time is right." Calamity nickered in clear contempt.

"Been tellin' themselves that for upwards of two hundred years now. Truth is, they're too arrogant an' lazy t' bother. S'long as they c'n keep tellin' themselves that they'll do the right thing eventually, they c'n live with themselves. Meanwhile, y'lot are all dyin' down here, from slavers an' raiders an' monsters… and yer making a damn hard effort of savin' yerselves without their help." Sounded more to me like the pegasus ponies were scared.

I opened the footlocker and started looking at the items inside.

"And you?" Velvet asked.

"Ah didn't find the livin' with myself so easy as that lot seem to, buncha winged horseapples." Wow, Calamity, so very *glad* to have you on Equestria's side, but bitter much?

A few moments later, Velvet trotted into the back of the delivery wagon. She spared a glance back in Calamity's direction, then noticed I had opened the footlocker. With a pleased sound, she virtually danced over the debris to reach me.

Inside: numerous scrolls, ruined when a bottle of something had shattered, and the glass shards of said bottle, a framed picture of a bunny rabbit, a small crystal orb sealed in a clear bag (Property of the Ministry of Peace – Restricted Viewing Only – Unauthorized Viewers Will Be Prosecuted!), and a book (*Supernaturals*).

"Oh!" Velvet gasped and made a sound that I felt I could fairly describe as a squee. I watched her, the corners of my mouth twitching upwards as I realized that Velvet Remedy, the amazing unicorn of unparallel beauty and musical grace who had inspired least three hundred fans, was herself more than a bit of a fanfilly.

"I know what this is!" Velvet announced, floating the bag with the orb up for closer inspection. "It's a memory orb. Used to record events not only with sound but moving picture. Much better than a recorder or a camera. Rare too!" Velvet collected the memory orb and the bunny photo. I was surprised when she left the book.

"Oh, I already have that one. But you should take it, Littlepip. I know you'll find it useful." Something in her expression made me think there was a joke here, and at my expense. Still, I wasn't one to turn down a book, especially if it was one Velvet Remedy suggested.

I had just finished sliding the book into my saddle bags when my Eyes-Forward Sparkle compass exploded with red. I froze. Crap… that's a *lot* of enemies! In my mind, I knew the slavers had found us again. And, from the looks of things, they had brought an army!

"Littlepip? What is it?"

Anxiously, I whispered, "Go get Calamity. Quietly. …please." I turned slowly in place. There was a gap in the red; we weren't entirely surrounded. "Trouble!" More than we could handle!

Velvet immediately tensed, nodded nervously, and trotted out as quickly and quietly as she could, only knocking over one crate along the way. We both winced. As she reached the back end of the wagon, she stopped, aghast. "Zombie-ponies!"

What? Not slavers? I moved up next to her. I was already forming how I was going to explain to her about ghouls, but the words died on my lips as I took in the blank, hungry stares and shambling, grotesque movements of the approaching herd. These did not look like ghouls; these looked like zombie-ponies! I remembered the warning: *Ya get inta the wrong places, y'll find yerself hunted by whole packs of cannibal ghoul-ponies gone zombie.*

Moving closer to Calamity, I whispered, "Follow me." We watched them shuffle a foot nearer. Two. The closest zombie-pony broke into a slavering charge!

"Run!"

We ran. Ran like we were being chased by a mindless hoard of monsters intent on eating us alive. Because we were!

The zombie-ponies exploded into action, joining the hunt, our flesh the prize they were after. Many launched into the air and flew towards us. I tried to telekinetically grab a downed sky chariot as we raced past, but the glow around my horn sparked and died. I had no telekinetic tricks to save us.

Velvet Remedy shrieked as a zombie-pony dove from the sky. She ducked, the creature overshooting her and crashing into a tree. I leapt over the body and kept going, my side beginning to hurt.

That hurt swiftly grew into burning coals buried in my side, bringing tears to my eyes and threatening to sap my strength. Two more zombie-ponies dived towards us. Calamity, wide-eyed in fear, suddenly scowled and spat out, "Aw, screw this!" He skidded to a halt, rearing around, and opened fire. The shot ripped the fealtherless wing off one of the zombies, causing it to lurch into the other. The two tumbled out of the sky in a spin, splashing gorily into the half-buried metal skeleton of a huge wagon designed to carry smaller wagons.

Ahead, the rusted hulk of a long passenger chariot rose out of the ground like a barricade. Launching himself into the air, Calamity yelled for us to go around it and keep running. "Don't slow down! Not fer an instant!" he cried out as he dodged another flying zombie-pony, kicking his saddle to reload.

Velvet was pulling well ahead of me, my shorter legs and my burning side threatening to spell out a most horrific death for me. Velvet tore around the side of the passenger wagon and disappeared behind it. I could hear the herd right at my tail, hooves thundering over the ground in a hungry stampede, foul breath hitting my mane. I couldn't make the turn; they'd be on me if I tried. Hoping that my small size would come to my aid for once, I instead leapt for one of the shattered, gaping windows.

My body, saddlebags and all, sailed cleanly through the opening. I hit one of the benches inside and jumped for the opposite window without breaking speed. Jagged shards of glass cut at my neck and legs, slashing against my armor before snapping away as my saddlebags hit them. I was out again, and almost clear, when the strap for my sniper rifle caught on a piece of jagged metal, and I was jerked to a halt, swinging back into the wagon's side with a jarring thud.

I was caught! I tried to pull away, but my hooves barely brushed the ground. I could hear the hoofbeats of the multitude of zombie-ponies as they reached the long body of the wagon, the herd splitting to go around either side. I twisted about, trying to bite the strap loose before they were on top of me. Somewhere above, I heard Calamity taking shots; I heard the metal of the wagon dent and puncture, his hits for once not striking the enemy. Panic flared through me. If the zombie-ponies didn't get me, one of Calamity's wild shots might. (Terribly, I realized how preferable a fate that would be, and I prayed that Celestia would grant him the wisdom and mercy to shoot me if they started eating me!)

With a final strong bite, the strap broke, and I fell free. Instinctively, I grasped the sniper rifle in my teeth, realizing only later how foalish a waste of a precious second that was, and ran as hard as my screaming legs and side would let me!

The zombie herd was already coming around the passenger wagon and closing on me. Their hooves brutalized the discolored grass beneath. Even more swooped over it with an ease that made my shortcut laughable. My clear mind and heightened perceptions had become a horror. I could feel the ground tremble beneath me. I could calculate how swiftly they would be gnawing on my hide. I could make out a strange, faint pop even through the rumble of the herd.

I could feel myself lifted into the air as the wreckage of the passenger wagon was consumed in a flare of unleashed wild magic. I could see the pulsing cascade of colors cast strange shadows as swirling magical energies erupted through the air. I could smell the fetid corpse-stench of the zombies as they were blown apart, even as their body parts caught fire.

I hit the ground still running, the valley lurching about as I fought to keep from tumbling. Bits of zombie-pony splattered down about me like rain. Ahead of me, Velvet Remedy had stopped and was just staring, eyes fixed on a scene behind me I preferred not to imagine.

Most of the herd was killed in the blast, and many who were not had scattered… but not for long. Calamity swooped over me, crying out for a panting Velvet to turn back around and keep running.

A cluster of odd sky vehicles, painted a mottled light blue and grey with tiny splashes of white, formed the only possibly defensible position. Beyond that, the valley spread out into rolling, rocky hills that offered no cover at all.

We reached it as more zombie-ponies overflew us, landing just yards away. Velvet Remedy lowered her horn, charging at them, and skewered one messily, unable to hold back an "Eeeew!" that I empathized with completely. I tried to grasp Little Macintosh telekinetically, but my magic just couldn't. Desperately, I looked around for something I could grasp in my mouth, a piece of sufficiently spear-like debris would do.

What I found was infinitely better. At least, I thought so. As Calamity shot the zombie-pony moving towards me, I scrambled over to where the cargo of one of the vehicles had spilled. I had seen, in small and cruel glimpses, the beautiful light blue sky above the clouds. My Mint-al-clear mind quickly realized the paint on these strange sky chariots would have once served as camouflage. A pegasus military convoy! And, praise Celestia, one of the things they had been transporting was turrets!

I was trained to reprogram the spell matrix of a PipBuck. Tweaking a turret to run off my PipBuck's definitions of friend and foe was comparatively easy! Especially right now!

"uh, Li'lpip? Ya sure ya know what yer doin'?" Calamity asked, sparing me a glance as he landed between me and more zombie-ponies, firing again.

I was all grins. "You betcha!"

* * *

"Celestia watch you and keep you safe,
As you travel down the path you choose.
May Luna be with you and keep you strong,
So your courage you will never lose.
Remain loyal, honest and brave,
Forget not the ones that you save
And in our hearts you will do no wrong…"

Velvet Remedy's tune wove between humming and lyrics, the latter in a state of constant flux. For me, watching my idol actually crafting a song was amazing. Calamity didn't complain, he too found her music to be uplifting in the bleakness of the wasteland, although his occasional eye-rolling suggested he wished she would stick with one set of lyrics rather than seeking perfection.

It had been several hours since the zombies and the valley was safely behind us. A darker grey began to seep into the sky again. Not a storm, Calamity said with some encouragement. Just the approach of nightfall. (If I ever meet the pegasus ponies, I thought, I'll have to thank them for making the Equestrian Wasteland so depressing. Somehow, it was worse than the drab monotony of Stable Two, because I never believed the Stable could be better. Although that could have been the post-Mint-al depression talking.)

"oh my!" Velvet gasped as we crested a rolling hill and saw it: an absolutely *gigantic* billboard, far taller than any of the buildings I'd seen, loomed just beyond the next hill. The image, amazingly un-faded yet marred with the grime and water damage of centuries, was nothing but the giant face of an almost unbearably pink pony with a mane that age had turned into a candy cane. She was smiling, her eyes seeming to follow us.

I'd seen this before from the train. Even now, recognizable in this light and at this distance as a billboard, it – merciful Celestia! – still gave me a nervous chill. I stared as I walked closer, trying to imagine it before so many decades had taken their toll, before it had been repeatedly peppered by wind-blown dust and ash, streaked by rivulets of rain; back when its placement would have been clearly playful, set behind the raise of the hill so it looked like the pony was playing peek-a-boo with the whole damn countryside. Back when it wasn't so…

"…Luna-damned. Fucking. Creepy!"

I tried to shake off the feeling with a shudder, turning away from the massive billboard… and found myself staring at a sneaky sprite-bot.

"Hello, Littlepip!"

I would have been in the next country if Calamity didn't bite my fleeing tail. He held me while I ran in place until the panic left me. By that time, Watcher had wisely floated out of hoof's reach.

"You are so lucky I can't telekinetically hurl rocks at you right now!"

Velvet Remedy looked like she'd help me. Calamity was glaring distrustfully at the sprite-bot, wings out, legs spread in a defensive stance. “Li’lpip…?”

All I wanted to know at that moment was, “Watcher, are they safe?”

The sprite-bot bobbed. “Yes. Wagons are on their way. Although Ditzy Doo might now be under the impression that you can hack sprite-bots and send messages through them. Sorry ’bout that.”

“Li’lpip?” Calamity would have been growling if he could. “Ah don’ trust that thing!”

So, Watcher had found a way to relay the message without alerting the ponyfolk of New Appleloosa to what Watcher was able to do. At Calamity’s words, I realized I really didn’t trust Watcher either. And now that I knew the ponies we fought and nearly died to rescue were safe, or soon would be, quite a few more questions tumbled into my mind. First and foremost being, “You sent me into that raider pit knowing full well what, and who, I would find in there, didn’t you?”

Calamity broke off staring at the strangely-behaving bot, looking to me. I had never told him *why* I had gone into the Ponyville Library.

“They needed help.”

“You could have told me the truth!” I scowled.

“Hey, I didn’t exactly know you, now did I? You seemed like a good pony who would do the right thing once you saw it for yourself, but…”

Now I felt like growling. “You lied to me!”

“No!” If it was possible for the toneless, mechanical voice to sound heated, it would have. “I told you that I didn’t mean you harm. And I didn’t. I told you that you would find something you needed to survive in there…” The sprite-bot flew close. “And I’d say you found more valuable things in there than just a book. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Dammit, Watcher was right. I found Ditzy Doo, who was an acquaintance I valued far more than the guide she wrote (which I held in fairly high regard). Spinning a mental web, I could make an argument that my friendship with Calamity arose out of what happened there. Possibly, although less firmly, I could say my relationship with the New Appleloosans, and thus my ability to save many more ponies, including Velvet Remedy (for certain definitions of “saving”) stemmed from what Watcher pulled. I still wanted to stuff a hoof through the damn bot’s frontplate. But I knew it wouldn’t do any good. The sprite-bot wasn’t Watcher.

Velvet Remedy spoke up. “Littlepip, what’s going on here?”

I told them everything.

* * *

“Whoops! Almost out of time…” Watcher warned as I finished up my tale, Watcher only rarely commenting. Calamity was still giving the floating bot nasty looks.

I organized the questions in my head, prioritizing. “Watcher, you seem to know a lot about things…”

“Well, yeah.”

“What were the Ministries?” I had seen enough references to Ministries scattered in the artifacts of the past that I suspected such information would be helpful for context. I didn’t realize that I had just asked what was arguably the most important question of my life. (It was, at least, Celestia Tier.)

Watcher was silent for a while. Long enough that I thought our strange pseudo-companion might have winked away again. Watcher's words came slowly, deliberately. "Remember when I told you that you should search for your virtue? And I told you about the greatest heroes of Equestria?"

I nodded. "You mentioned them, yes."

"Well…" Watcher's words came slowly, as if they were painful. "The Massacre at Littlehorn broke Princess Celestia's heart. After that, nearly midway through the war, Princess Celestia decided She wasn't the right pony to lead Equestria anymore. So She stepped down, abdicated Her position to Her sister, Princess Luna…"

I listened in awe. I had never heard the Goddesses spoken about in this way before.

"The war had been devastating, both abroad and at home. Equestria was in severe distress, suffering from troubles within as well as from the enemy armies. You can't imagine what it was like back then.

"Those heroes I told you about? They were six amazing ponies with true hearts and virtuous souls, whose friendship held the power to change the world. Princess Celestia had always been like a mother to them. She saw them, one in particular, as Her children. She loved them and wanted to protect them. So Princess Celestia shielded them from the worst of the war, finding quests for them that kept them, mostly, out of harm's reach, or at least away from the battlefields. Sending them on diplomatic missions to the griffins and the buffalo – things like that.

"Princess Luna met them for the first time in a much different circumstance. Princess Luna respected them and saw them as Her equals. And, I really think, as Her saviors. And so when Princess Luna ascended to rule Equestria and fight the war, She called Equestria's most valuable heroes to serve as Her personal advisors. She called for the creation of new offices of government, one under each of them, whose job would be to take their advice and find ways to implement it."

"And those were the Ministries?"

"Yes."

I looked around at the bleak, ruined wasteland that had once been the beautiful nation of Equestria. "Doesn't look like that went so well."

Silence. Then Watcher spoke again. "Have you ever heard the old saying 'The portal to hell is opened with the incantation of good intentions'? If there was a moral to their story, I guess that would be it."

* * *

As night closed in, we approached a farm that seemed largely intact – no animals in the fields, but smoke curled up from the smokestack and there was a welcoming glow in several of the windows, as well as light seeping through the cracks around the silo doors. It was just the three of us again, Watcher having vanished with a pop, replaced by tinny, patriotic music and an oblivious sprite-bot. Calamity had kept a wary eye on the bot until it had wandered out of sight.

A raven fluttered down, perching on the first of what looked like a row of three planks sticking out of the ground near the edge of a barren pasture. The last plank was smaller and crooked. The last fellows standing of a fence, I presumed.

Quickly but carefully, we trotted down the rocky hillside and through the stone-strewn fields to reach the house. We needed a place to sleep, food to eat and, if possible, medical supplies. The house seemed like it was sent from Celestia Herself… assuming the ponies inside didn't shoot us for trespassing. Hanging hope on the hospitality of strangers was unwise in the Equestrian Wasteland.

A creaky windmill with two thirds of its blades missing squeaked rustily as we passed.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," I began. Just because there was no awful graffiti did not mean that the place wasn't full of raiders.

Velvet Remedy marched past me. "Really, Littlepip, you shouldn't sound so jaded…" She was raising a hoof to knock when the door swung open, bathing us in warm light. Velvet blinked at the empty space in front of her, then looked down to see the filly in the doorway.

She was pink. Garishly pink! It was oddly like looking at the face in the giant billboard, only much, much (much!) smaller. And younger. And a very imperfect match. It was hard to tell in the light, but she seemed wrong somehow. My eyes first lighted on a rough scar on her head, like she'd recently fallen headfirst, possibly at very high speed, and scraped herself up rather badly. The first guess that popped into my head was that she had jumped off the roof of her barn. Trying to fly? My eyes moved to her sides, looking for wings, but she was indeed an earth pony. Then my eyes caught her bare flank. She was young, but not that young. She stood less than a head shorter than me. I knew what it was like to strive for a cutie mark that wouldn't come; my heart went out to her. She had waited longer for hers than even I had, and was still wait… no, wait.

The wrongness snapped into focus. (If I'd still been on Mint-als, I would have realized it immediately!) Her coat wasn't actually her coat.

She'd painted herself pink!

I looked to Calamity and Velvet Remedy. From their expressions, they had seen it too, and it didn't sit well with them.

"Hello, dear," Velvet began. "Is your mother…"

"OH MY GOSH!" The filly jumped up, squealing in delight. Then just as quickly she brought a hoof to her mouth, gasping as if in horror. "Oh no! You're too late! I waited for you all day, but now we're closed!" Tears welled up in her wide eyes.

Velvet Remedy took a step back. "Oh dear. I'm so sorry, young one, but we're not…"

The look of horror dissipated instantly, replaced by a wide grin. "Of course you're not! As if we ever close!" She giggled exuberantly. She ran out of the house, dashing past us, then spun with a suddenly somber expression. "You really should hurry though. Nasty things haunt these fields at night!" With that ominous proclamation, she squealed with glee and ran towards the silo.

We looked at each other. I was confused. Calamity simply shrugged and started trotting after the young, pink girl.

As we reached the silo, Velvet called out, "I'm sorry, sweetie, but we didn't get your name?"

"OH!" The pink filly jumped. "Hee! Of course! Sorry! I'm just so excited! You're the first visitors I've had to the museum in… oh ages!" Giggling again, "Oh, I'm Pinkie Bell!"

"Museum?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Pinkie Bell braced herself and pushed open the silo door. The inside of the silo looked like a party had exploded inside it. Not in a good way – more like a party had ingested a grenade, and the room was now splattered with party-gore and party-entrails.

"Welcome to the Pinkie Pie Museum!!" The girl was practically bouncing. "This here is the *number one* museum of all things Pinkie Pie in all of Equestria!"

Calamity was shaking his head, but there was a relieved smile on his face. Velvet Remedy gave Calamity a smirk and he rolled his eyes in return. This was weird, no doubt about it. But: no slaver, no raiders, no horrible monsters – a descent into the slightly bizarre was almost a welcome change.

Pinkie Bell didn't let up, didn't even stop for breath. "And what do you know, you're just in time for the tour! Now where's our tour guide? She better not be sleeping again… oh wait! It's ME!"

The "museum" was a single huge room. There wasn't much to tour. But Pinkie Bell made a point to stop and show off one item after another, most of them adorned with saggy balloons or vomited all over with confetti.

"… and they danced and danced all day and all night! And best of all this is the *very silo* where Pinkie Pie, as a young filly, invented the first party ever and got her Cutie Mark!"

Velvet leaned close to me, murmuring, "I'm fairly certain that parties have existed for more than two-hundred and fifty years." But Pinkie Bell was clearly on a roll and not about to stop for questions.

"During the first years of the war, Pinkie Pie traveled all over, throwing parties for Equestrian troops about to head into battle! Bringing them a taste of their homeland, and more importantly, bringing them cheer and putting smiles on their faces!" Pinkie Bell waved her arms at several easels with framed photographs of Pinkie Pie, dressed in frills and fishnets, dancing on stage in front of nearly a thousand ponies. "That is, when she wasn't on super secret missions for Princess Celestia!"

"She looks a lot smaller in person," I commented back to Velvet, thinking of how much less threatening the real pony seemed than the insane billboard just a few miles from this farm.

"Pinkie Pie's only regret was that she couldn't be everywhere helping all the troops all the time! (Although with Dash, she could come pretty close!) So of course…"

Calamity raised a hoof. "Dash her friend or Dash the drug?" Pinkie Bell seemed not to notice.

Prancing towards a familiar poster, Pinkie Bell rambled on, unstoppable. "…when Princess Luna offered to give Pinkie Pie a whole Ministry of her very own to do whatever she wanted to with it, she pounced on the chance! And the Ministry of Morale was born!"

It was the PINKIE PIE IS WATCHING YOU FOREVER poster, this one intact. The elderly pink mare was smiling mischeviously, as if she'd just played a wonderful prank. And with the whole face visible, I swore I caught a curious look in her eyes. I no longer felt guilty with the poster staring at me; now I felt uncomfortably exposed.

A practiced twirl took Pinkie Bell to a table covered in a chemistry set and several… samples. "Pinkie Pie was always really great at cooking things. And when Princess Luna (boo) declared that the drugs that were flooding Equestria from zebra lands were harmful to the people, Pinkie Pie decided to prove that they could be good, a fun addition to any party! Working day and night, Pinkie Pie concocted a mixture of Mint-als and some of her favorite things, creating… dun DUN *DUN!* Party Time Mint-als!!" Pinkie Bell lifted up a tin, showing them off.

I wanted that tin!

Pinkie Bell set it down next to the chemistry set and continued on. I lost track of her monologue because my mind insisted that I needed to be absolutely sure I remembered where that tin was.

"…by that time the Ministry of Morale had transformed Pinkie Pie into an iconic figure who transcended the boundaries of one pony to become a mystical figure that easily stood alongside Princess Celestia and Princess Luna Themselves!"

Okay, that was just wrong.

"Little colts and fillies knew that Pinkie Pie was always watching them. She saw everything they ever did. And if they were good little colts and fillies, who were nice and friendly, who did their chores and smiled and laughed and never spread seditious lies, then on their birthdays, Pinkie would bring them a wonderful party!" Pinkie Bell waved a hoof in warning, "But if they were bad little colts and fillies, Pinkie Pie would bring them a rock!"

What the…?! I looked to Velvet Remedy in disbelief.

Meanwhile, Pinkie Bell had stopped. Her eyes went wide, and she sucked in a huge breath. And waited. One second, two, three, four… Finally, Pinkie Bell let out the breath with a disappointed sigh. "I'm sorry. I thought I felt an impromptu musical number coming on."

Velvet Remedy studiously looked elsewhere.

"Anyway, what was I saying… oh yea, how Pinkie Pie brings parties!"

Velvet turned back to the little filly, a little startled. "Brings? Dear, you do know that Pinkie Pie is dead, don't you?"

Pinkie Bell didn't miss a beat. "Oh, she's physically dead! But her spirit lives on inside all of us!"

I watched Velvet Remedy's eyebrows raise. And then she snickered, seeming to accept that on a level I just couldn't. While I facehoofed, Velvet leaned close to Calamity and whispered, "I think Pinkie Pie's spirit has a stalker."

I managed to miss most of the rest of the "tour" because I was trying to come up with a way to talk Pinkie Bell into parting with what was probably a prize part of her collection. But I was snapped back when Pinkie Bell announced that she had something to ask of us. A proposal.

"It turns out, I have the *only copy* of the recipe for Party-Time Mint-als!…" Okay, I knew that wasn't true. Calamity's friend also had it. But this might be the fastest, easiest way to get it for myself. And why stress over asking for a single tin when I could get the damned recipe!?

"…And I'd be willing to share it with you if you can bring me the one piece of my Pinkie Pie Museum collection that I'm missing! A limited edition Pinkie Pie magical statuette! Bring it here, and I'll throw the party to end all parties!"

“I shouldn’t have made fun,” Velvet Remedy was saying as she trotted nervously about the cramped upstairs bedroom that Pinkie Bell had absolutely insisted we stay in for the night.

When Pinkie Bell explained that a few sets of very special magical figurines had been crafted of each of the Ministry Mares, my mind had immediately gone to the orange pony statuette with the three apples on her flank. Finding another one like that, one specifically of Pinkie Pie, could be virtually impossible. On the other hoof, Pinkie Bell insisted that the statuettes would have survived even the apocalypse. And really, I’d found one after being Outside for roughly what, a week?

Calamity sat on the bed, one ear to the wall as he watched Velvet fret.

“That poor filly. She’s so terribly sad.”

Calamity whinnied. “Sad? Were ya listenin’ t’ the same little pink-painted ball o’ Dash tha’ I was?” Then remembering his own earlier confusion, he clarified, “The drug.”

Velvet Remedy stopped. “Oh yes. And that poor girl is *not happy.* Not at all.” She hung her head. “She’s full of pain. Something horrible must have happened to her.”

Looking at Velvet Remedy, I was once more struck by the scarlet and gold stripes in her silvery-white mane, again finding them oddly reminiscent of the Ministry of Peace pink and yellow. Only then I was thinking of it as coincidence or destiny. Now, I wondered if it wasn’t more like Pinkie Bell’s painted-on pink coat.

Velvet caught my stare and seemed to fathom what I was thinking eerily quickly. “It’s not the same!” she insisted quietly.

Calamity was paying more attention to the wall. Abruptly he jumped to his hooves. “She’s gone. An’ if ya don’t want somethin’ horrible t’ happen t’ us, Ah suggest we be leavin’ too.” He moved to the door and pushed on the handle. It didn’t budge.

It was locked.

“Maybe she’s just trying to us safe from the ‘nasty things’ that haunt the fields at night?” I offered, not really believing it.

Velvet Remedy had pushed past me to try the door herself. Now she whinnied, “Doesn’t matter. We’re leaving. I will not be locked in a cage.”

Calamity had moved to the window and was looking down on the farm below. I reared up, putting my hooves on the ledge, and peered out through the glass. For a moment, I saw nothing. Just the night. Then, a crack of dimly pulsing, colored light appeared as Pinkie Bell pushed open the door of the barn just enough to slide through, then pushed it shut behind her.

Calamity waited, quiet and still, until the door of the farmhouse opened, casting a rectangle of light across the ground with a Pinkie Bell shape cut out of it. The moment the door closed, he turned and bucked at the window.

The crash was terribly loud.

The escape would have been treacherous, if not impossible, without a pegasus pony to fly us down. We started across the farm, crouching low, keeping to the deeper shadows in the darkness. We were creeping alongside the barn when impulse overtook me and I slipped inside.

I later told Velvet Remedy and Calamity that I wasn’t sure why I entered the barn. But the truth was, I had exactly two reasons. First, the recipe for Party Time Mint-als had not been in the museum, and I had not spotted it in the house. It could have easily been hidden anywhere – in a book or under a rug – but I was guessing that Pinkie Bell's obsession would not allow her to not put it on display. So I was hoping it was in the barn.

Second, that oddly glowing, pulsing light reminded me uncomfortably of the way that passenger wagon had exploded after Calamity shot it. I had asked Calamity about it later, and he had explained that some of the really big skywagons, like that one which had been designed to carry dozens of ponies, used a magical field generated by a spark engine so that a single pony could pull it through the air. Like spark batteries, those engines of arcane science still hold serious magical energies. Calamity didn't understand it at that level, of course. He just knew that shooting a hole through the magic box in one of those vehicles unleashes one hell of a vortex.

Such a vortex was brief and very violent. The idea that Pinkie Bell might have something akin to that in her barn, possibly a somehow stable or perpetual magical vortex, deeply worried me.

* * *

"What am I looking at?"

It was small, geometrically shaped with surfaces that seemed to twist through each other. The whole thing was the size of a bushel of apples, and swirled with sickly mesmerizing colors.

I could feel it drawing me in. I was losing myself in it. It took physical effort to pull myself away from the thing. Casting my gaze about, I found a safe. The rest of the barn was almost completely barren. I slipped over to it and began to ply the one trade I had which seemed truly unique.

The safe popped open with a whisper.

Inside was my prize: the Party-Time Mint-al recipe!

But it wasn't mine. I scavenged. I looted the homes of slavers and raiders. But this was stealing from some poor young earth pony not yet a mare.

But… Party-Time Mint-als! And really, all I had to do was take it long enough to copy it onto my PipBuck. It'd put it right back. And that wouldn't really be stealing, right?

Except Pinkie Bell was offering it as a reward for helping her with something. And that made it feel like stealing. Like I was taking a reward I hadn't earned.

I sat, staring into that safe for I don't know how long. Finally, I focused my levitation magics… and picked up the one other item in the safe. A recorder with a single imprinted message. I copied it into my PipBuck and started it.

I didn't recognize the voice, but she sounded young. At least as young as Pinkie Bell was now.

> *"Peartree,*
>
> *"The raiders came back yesterday. They didn't take kindly to daddy running them off last week with his shotgun, so this time they came in force. Mama made us hide in the upstairs bedroom and cast a spell over us to keep us from being seen. She made us promise to be quiet and still. But Silver Bell…*

> *"My little sister has always been able to make beautiful music, like the tinkling of dozens of magical bells. We all adore it. But Silver Bell, sometimes when she's frightened or worried, the spell happens all on its own. She didn't mean to. It was an accident.*
>
> *"The raiders killed mama and daddy. They killed them really slow and brutal. And they made us watch. It was…*
>
> *"I buried them out by the end of the east field. Put up a couple planks as tombstones. I hate that they won't last long, but I can't carve their names into rocks. And mama and daddy deserve to have their names over their graves.*
>
> *"Silver Bell has nightmares every night. Honestly, I do most nights too. And during the days she just curls up silent-like. Never crying. Never smiling. I can't even get her to eat. I don't know what to do.*
>
> *"I'm going to try taking her to Tenpony Tower. I've heard there's a buck up there who takes in orphans. It's a long walk, and so I'm headed up to gather provisions from the neighbors. If I'm not back when you get here, please load up the wagon. I know I can't ask you to come with us; you have your own folks to take care of. But I would really appreciate it if you could hang around so I could say goodbye.*
>
> *"You're the best buckfriend I could have asked for.*
>
> *"Love, Memory."*

I sat there, stunned. Oh sweet Goddess Celestia…

"You shouldn't have listened to that!" I turned with a start to see Pinkie Bell (…no, Silver Bell!) staring right into my face. "It's. Not. Yours."

This close, I got a much better look at that scar. Horrible realization hit me like ice water. Silver Bell was a unicorn. *She'd cut off her own horn!*

I recoiled, backing into the open safe.

"You want it so much? Keep it!" Pinkie/Silver Bell reached up to swing the safe closed on me.

From behind her, Velvet Remedy's voice broke the air. "You're not like Pinkie Pie."

Pinkie/Silver Bell froze. Then slowly turned away from me. Still, she blocked the front of the safe, and I somehow couldn't bring myself to barge through her to get out.

"You're nothing like Pinkie Pie," Velvet Remedy spoke slowly, calmly. Her voice wasn't accusing now. It was mostly sad. "You are, if anything, the opposite of Pinkie Pie."

I watched the filly in front of me shake. Emotions seemed to rush through her as if they didn't want to stay or were eager to get out of the way so the next emotion could take hold.

"You don't bring happiness. When I look at you, all I feel is sad," Velvet continued, her voice giving gentleness to her words. "If Pinkie Pie were to meet you, she wouldn't throw a party…"

"Yes she would!"

Velvet paused only a moment, "Maybe she would, but she wouldn't throw a party because she wanted to have fun with you. She would throw a party because she wanted to help you. Because you would make her very sad."

"W-w-what do y-you know!?"

"I know that laughter, real laughter, isn't forced. It isn't something you paint on to hide how you are truly feeling." Velvet Remedy walked slowly towards the filly, who was trapped between flying into a rage and breaking down in tears. "I know that you are very badly hurt inside. And it's not the sort of hurt that can be fixed with a party. Or healed by my horn."

By the time Velvet Remedy had reached the filly, Pinkie/Silver Bell was shaking badly.

"What happened to your parents wasn't your fault. What happened to your sister wasn't your fault…"

To her sister? Suddenly, I remembered the three planks in the field. The last one crooked, like it was planted by someone smaller and younger who didn't manage so well. I thought of an older sister named Memory trotting out alone towards the nearest neighbors, another farm probably a dozen miles away through territory being savaged by raiders. My heart broke.

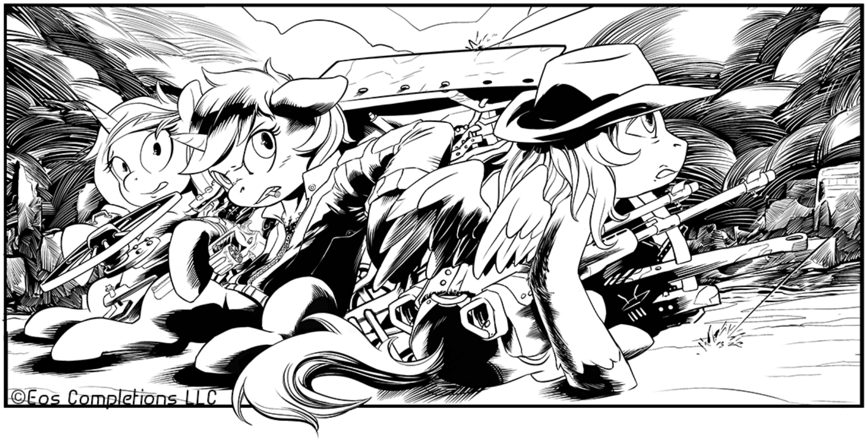
"YES! IT! WAS!" And with that, Silver Bell collapsed into wretched sobs. Velvet Remedy was there to wrap her head and a leg around the filly, giving her a mane to cry into.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Math Wrath – You are able to optimize your PipBuck's targeting spell logic. S.A.T.S. is now 20% cooler.

Chapter Ten

Course Correction



"Yeah. It's a good thing they aren't paying me to agree with them. Holy Flame, my ass!"

Fireworks.

Pinkie Bell (no, Silver Bell – I really should think of her as Silver Bell) called it fireworks; she had been saving it until her Pinkie Pie Museum collection was complete. Of course. If you were going to throw a "party to end all parties", you would need fireworks.

"Is that what I think it is?" Railright moaned, staring at the strange object full of pulsing, twisting colors from the open barn door. Not willing to take a step inside. Outside beyond him, I could see Ditzy Doo helping the little filly into her delivery wagon. ("I Deliver Absolutely Everything!" was emblazoned on the side, along with the constellation of circles that I supposed was the ghoul pony's trademark.)

Watcher had come through again. A sprite-bot had silently wandered into the farm deep into the night. Watcher was keeping an eye out for us. My slightly creepy guardian stranger. It had taken considerably less persuading to get Watcher to contact Ditzy Doo again for help. Maybe it was because Velvet Remedy's warning had been still fresh in my head, and I had asked nicely, saying please this time. More likely, it was because Watcher had totally freaked out the moment I had lead the sprite-bot into the barn.

Watcher's panicked reaction at the object in the barn had been unexpected and frightening. Rather unlike Velvet Remedy's more refined freak-out when she met Ditzy Doo. Once I had assured her that the ghoul pony was a friend, and not a ravenous zombie-pony like the herd which had chased us down yesterday, Velvet had smiled and acted perfectly polite. But she was still keeping her distance and giving the ghoul horrified looks. I think the medical pony inside of her was having an allergic reaction to the very existence of pony ghouls.

I had expected Ditzy Doo's personal arrival. Silver Bell needed help, and we couldn't provide it ourselves. There was a possible place in Manehattan that could help the poor filly, if it still existed. But as my oh-so-uneventful trek across the Equestrian Wasteland had already proven, it was far too dangerous to drag somepony like Silver Bell along. She needed love and comfort, safety and prolonged therapy. Wandering the wasteland wouldn't provide that, and another hostile encounter might scar her even worse. I worried that her pain and wounds were too deep to heal already. I couldn't risk that. And with the lack of alternatives, New Appleloosa was the only real option I saw. And with what I knew of Ditzy Doo, it would be hard to find somepony better to help her, outside of a professional psychiatrist pony. And I knew Ditzy Doo would really care about her.

I had not expected Railright to arrive on the wagon. And although he had seemed pleasant before, something about this visit felt foreboding.

I turned away from him and back towards the strange object, careful to look slightly above and to the side of it rather than right into the swirling surface.

"Ayep." Calamity was standing just inside the barn, having pulled the door open. He too refused to get much closer, although out of reasonable caution rather than abject fear. "That's a balefire bomb."

Pinkie Bell had an undetonated megaspell in her barn.

For fireworks.

* * *

Shafts of pure sunlight pierced the air from hundreds of tiny breaks in the omnipresent cloud cover. It was like the night I first stepped out of Stable Two, only instead of a fathomless abyss sprinkled with stars, what shown through above was a sky of the most beautiful blue. I wanted that sky so badly. But the breaks closed up even faster than they appeared. By noon, the grey covering would be solid again.

Ditzy Doo had wrapped Silver Bell in a blanket and was strapping herself to the front of the wagon with practiced ease. She caught me watching her and smiled back, her one odd eye rolling up. I tried not to shudder at that, and gave her my best smile back. Then cast a mildly reproachful gaze towards the stack of barrels that Velvet Remedy was trying to remain in the vicinity of without actually hiding.

"What in tarnation d'ya plan t' do with that thing?" Calamity was asking Railright as they clopped away from the barn. "Ah'd suggest collapsin' the barn on it, but that might set it off. Hell, fer all we know, movin' it might set the gol-darned thing off!"

Railright neighed. "Ah have no idea." He held up a hoof to block Calamity. "Y'all mind if Ah have a word w' Littlepip? Alone-like?"

Calamity shrugged and trotted over to Ditzy Doo. Railright approached me. My sense of unease increased.

"Y'know, if ya keep sendin' us folks, we're gonna hafta build a bigger town," he began casually, but I detected a stern tone underneath.

"Well, I'm hoping to be freeing a lot more ponies from slavers," I admitted, thinking once again of Fillydelphia. "But I'm only sending them to you because you're the kindest, most decent folk I've met so far." In all honesty, I was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable sending ponies to live in a town that had a history of trading with slavers. I only hoped the influx of mistreated slaver captives might swing their view.

"Don't get me wrong. We admire what yer tryin' t' do. You're out there savin' lives, an' there ain't nopony complainin' 'bout that. We'll give 'em a good home, and see the little filly an' the others from old Appleloosa are cared fer right."

Here it comes, I thought.

"But…" Railright grimaced. "Y'all are reckless an' dangerous. Ya got six of our best train ponies slaughtered, some of 'em bein' friends o' mine fer longer than Ah can remember. Ya destroyed one of our only functionin' trains, and y'all pretty much set fire t' any peaceful relations New Appleloosa had managed with the slavers. Ah'll hafta be puttin' extra guard ponies on all the walls now, an' we'll need t' be sendin' more guards with the caravans. Honestly, Ah'm worried if we got enough ammo in the town iffin they should decide to take things out on us fer what ya ponies did."

I fell back onto my haunches, ears flat. My heart was sinking.

"So Ah'm sorry t' tell ya this… Ah truly am… but y'all aren't exactly welcome back in New Appleloosa anymore." He tried to soften the blow. "At least, not fer a good long while."

I felt a little numb.

Railright glanced over his flank to where Ditzy Doo and Calamity were stomping hooves, bartering over the scavenged goods that had begun to weigh down our saddlebags. Railright rolled his gaze back to me. "Ditzy Doo has been damned insistent 'bout tradin' with ya. But Ah have convinced her t' conduct her business with y'all at the gates."

* * *

The cloud ceiling had fully mended itself, casting the Equestrian Wasteland once again into a dreary grey. Velvet Remedy and Calamity trotted ahead of me, deep in discussion over song lyrics; Velvet had somehow manages to persuade Calamity to try a duet with her.

My heart felt like lead, but I was surprised that Railright's news didn't hurt a lot more. I did not feel like a rug had been pulled out from under me. In my mind, I had forged no real ties to New Appleloosa, save perhaps a fond respect for the author of *The Wasteland Survival Guide*. I had never considered making it my home, particularly not after learning why Calamity had refused to make it his. So I was no more adrift now than I had been last night.

I checked my PipBuck. Its automap had several new locations flagged now, including the one towards which we were traveling: Manehattan. Calamity had bartered quite well, gaining us medical supplies, food, canteens and even ammo for Little Macintosh; he had also bartered to let us look over some maps from Ditzy Doo, recording the information in my PipBuck. It was from those maps that I had obtained markers for Manehattan (which was less than a week's trot) and Fillydelphia (which was not). The Bell farmhouse had possessed a small water purifier, allowing us to fill our canteens for the long walk ahead.

Silver Bell was leaving behind her Pinkie Pie Museum. I had asked her permission, very quietly, to look at her Party-Time Mint-als recipe. It was now stored in my PipBuck. For some reason, I hadn't felt like mentioning that to the others yet.

Fatigue was beginning to take its toll on all of us. We hadn't slept, staying with Silver Bell until Ditzy Doo arrived. Even when the filly cried herself into a nightmare-filled sleep, we had stood vigil.

In the distance, I could see a very narrow white tower rising up into the sky, so high it pierced the clouds. Part of me was strongly tempted to divert towards it, just to have a look, but it was miles away and would add many hours to our trip.

Instead, I'd try to sate my curiosity with the small series of buildings up ahead. I trotted faster to catch up to Calamity and Velvet.

Velvet Remedy had paused in her songwriting, bothered by a question, "Calamity, if the pegasus ponies live in the clouds, what do they eat?"

Calamity answered nonchalantly, "Oh, they grow their own food up there." He looked at her, "Haven't you ever heard of cloud seeding?"

Velvet Remedy stared at him. To Calamity's credit, he held the deadpan expression for quite a few seconds before breaking into a grin.

Velvet chuckled. "Very funny. Fine, have your secrets. But one day, I'll expect a real answer."

I tried to float my binoculars out and take a closer look at the buildings, but I was barely able to get past opening my saddle bags before my levitation was exhausted. By Luna's grace, I needed sleep.

Calamity launched into the air, zooming forward to do an aerial sweep above the structures. He came back, looking grim. "Raiders."

* * *

BLAM!

Another raider pony went down, most of her head splattering on the wall behind her, mixing with the graffiti. I dipped back behind the apple cart (the apples had long rotted away and the raiders had taken to decorating it with pony skulls). Little Macintosh had two more shots left. I had more bullets, but I wasn't quite sure how to reload it without relying on my magic. It was strange enough firing the gun in my teeth.

Velvet Remedy crouched beside me, tending to a gash in Calamity's side. To her credit, she'd actually tried to talk to the raiders. They returned her hello with some extremely perverted suggestions, at least one of which involved necrophilia. That's when Calamity started picking off the ponies who had taken sniping positions on the roofs.

"Hook me t' the cart," Calamity insisted.

"Excuse me?" Velvet looked at him questioningly.

Calamity hoof-tapped the apple cart. "Instead of hidin' behind it, let's use it. Hook me up an' climb in!"

I looked between the cart and Calamity. "Wait… you mean you're going to pull us through the air as we shoot these guys? You can do that?"

"Ayep."

I blinked. It would certainly make for a novel combat. I nodded to Velvet, and she began strapping Calamity in.

Moments later, we were in the air. It was exhilarating. The wind blowing through my coat, the ground no longer holding me. It was like falling, only fun. A little bit terrifying, but fun.

"Don'tcha forget t' shoot back!" Calamity called out, realizing that I was enraptured by the experience. A raider pony's bullet thudded into the bottom of the wagon. I suspect it hadn't been the first. My mind snapped back to the battle, and I took aim.

BLAM!

Down went another raider pony. I lined up on a third with the scope and tongued the trigger. My target fell, blood pooling under him. This was almost too easy.

Only now I had to reload or switch weapons. The combat shotgun was going to be useless at this range, and I had lost my assault rifle in the train battle. That left the sniper rifle, a weapon so large it required either telekinesis or a mounting to fire. I looked at the cart, figuring I could brace it on the posts.

"Whoa!" Calamity shouted as the sky filled with bullets, one coming close enough to scrape his battle saddle. "Pesky varmint! Li'lpip, see if ya can't take that one hidin' behind them mailboxes. Ah'll bank so's ya c'n get a better shot."

I lined up the sniper rifle, bracing it as best I could, then aimed down the scope as Calamity swung the cart around. I spotted the raider unicorn, an ugly mare with only scraps of purple left in her mane. She was mostly protected behind the row of mailboxes, floating a scoped assault carbine, a serious upgrade to the assault rifle I had used before. I held my tongue until Calamity's maneuvering gave me a better shot.

The raider dived almost fully into view, unleashing a torrent of bullets up at us. Slipping into the targeting nirvana of S.A.T.S., I barely noticed Calamity's cry as I tongued the trigger and sent the raider to the Goddesses' judgement.

I felt the wagon tilt dangerously. "Calamity!" Velvet Remedy cried out beside me. The wagon turned sharply in the air.

I gasped. Calamity had been shot, clean through his right wing! The wing was seeping with blood and he grunted in agony as he tried to keep the wagon aloft. "Ah'm sorry, folks," he whinnied painfully. "Y'all might experience some turbulence…" The wagon dropped five feet, eliciting a yelp from both Velvet Remedy and myself. Calamity caught the fall, pulling up, trying to make it to the roof of the most intact building.

He made it. Mostly. My friend crashed down onto the roof hard, skidding along the broken tiling, the wagon slamming down behind him at a bad angle, one of the wheels snapping off as it threw Velvet Remedy and me. I found myself airborne in the not-fun falling way. I hit the roof once, bouncing, pain bursting in my shoulder, and flew into a pile of crates and ammo boxes (the former splintering on impact).

I looked up in time to see the apple cart roll over Calamity, jolting off the lip of the roof with a loud crack, and proceed over the edge, dragging Calamity along with it! Blood smeared the rooftop from his shot wing. The wounded pegasus gasped and kicked out with his legs, catching and bracing himself against the lip of the roof. He stopped, trembling, the weight of the wagon pulling at him through the still-mostly-intact harness. "Help!"

Velvet Remedy moaned nearby. The lucky mare had managed to land face-first on a nice, soft mattress – raider bedding (on second thought perhaps not so lucky). I pulled myself to my hooves, wincing in pain from splinters and scrapes and a brutal bruise in my shoulder, and dashed towards Calamity. Velvet galloped past me, her longer legs carrying her to the pegasus's side where she started biting at the strained harness. I swiftly joined her. Calamity groaned.

After only a few very long seconds, harness cut, the cart fell down the side of the building and smashed on the fragments of sidewalk below.

⁂

Velvet Remedy knelt on the mattress (which she had tried flipping over to a less grossly stained side, only to be deterred by the colonies of bugs living beneath), and contemplated the memory orb we had found in the wreckage of Ditzy Doo Deliveries. She hadn't actually played it yet.

Velvet had taken care in cleaning and mending Calamity's wounded wing as best she could, then wrapping it in healing bandages, assuring the pegasus that he would be ready to fly again by the next morning. Presuming, of course, that he follow her advice and stay earth-bound until he could get some rest.

Likewise, she had treated the rest of our injuries with healing potions and poultices. Once again, our medical supplies had been reduced below what I would have wanted; I was counting on scavenging more from the buildings. Surely the raiders had been hoarding some.

There was a hatch down into the building. Moments after we had cut the apple cart loose, a single raider pony had burst up out of it, armed with a metal rake whose tines had been sharpened into deadly claws. He was felled by a twin-shot from Calamity's battle saddle. Even at the edge of passing out, Calamity was still a perfect shot.

"Why a balefire bomb?" I asked as I reclaimed my sniper rifle, struggling to put it back into its harness without levitation. (It turned out that reloading bullets into Little Macintosh had been within my capabilities still, but only so long as the beautiful gun was held in my mouth.)

My companions both looked up, startled. I clarified, "I mean, why was it a bomb? I thought megaspells were cast."

Calamity, who had curled up near the roof hatch, simultaneously resting and keeping guard, answered, "Unicorn ponies cast spells. Zebras did not. They mixed their magics into potions and phylacteries and fetishes. Their megaspells were either worked into enchanted missiles, like the one which obliterated Cloudsdayle, or snuck into population centers and detonated, like the balefire bomb which annihilated Manehattan."

I nodded at that and turned my attention to pulling ammo from the raider's ammo boxes. One locked box provided me with several grenades. Nice.

Looking up to Calamity, "Ready to brave the building?" I was hoping that all the raiders were already dealt with, and we could scavenge freely. But that was probably wishful thinking.

Calamity nodded, getting onto his hooves. Velvet Remedy got up, moving past me towards the hatch. I leaned forward and bit the end of Velvet Remedy's tail (trying not to think of what it tasted like) and reined in her forward trot. "Stay here," I whispered. "Let us scout it first." Velvet nickered at me unappreciatively but stopped.

Calamity gripped the hatch handle with his teeth and flapped his wings (getting a disapproving sigh from Velvet Remedy) pulling it open. The warm, flickering light and acrid smoke of burning trash barrels greeted us. Crouching down, I made my way down the stairs. Calamity followed.

There were three raider ponies inside, barricaded and waiting nervously for us to show ourselves. I waved Calamity back, then backed up myself. A moment later, I sent several of my new grenades down to see them.

"oh fuck!" came a voice from below, followed by three rapid explosions, then a silence marred only by the sound of falling debris.

Creeping back down, I found three bloody corpses and a hell of a mess. The rest of the building was raider-free, although Calamity and I had to clear a few tripwires and "disarm" a bouquet of grenades hanging over the front door before I was ready to declare the building safe for looting. (Sadly, neither Calamity nor I had the sort of finesse with explosives and traps that would allow us to safely collect the grenades. Disarming the grenade bouquet was done at a distance, and involved a thrown bucket and a lot of running.)

I returned to the stair, calling Velvet Remedy down.

"Oh, I can come down now? How nice." Velvet gave me a flat expression and trotted down past me.

Crap.

Below, I heard her suck in a breath at the slaughter below. I closed my eyes, wincing, then opened them and walked down after her.

⁂

The buildings had included a postal office, a grocery and Equestrian Army Recruitment Center. The last of those had taken a direct hit, leaving only two freestanding walls, one of which still boasted a large recruitment poster. ("You too can be a Steel Ranger!" it proclaimed, with an image of a rearing pony… or at least a rearing pony-shaped suit of fully-enclosed armor, complete with a shining lamp on its forehead, towering over a rock-strewn landscape littered with dead, bloody zebras). The rest of the building had collapsed into a crater at the bottom.

We had crash-landed on the roof of the post office. It turned out to be the most scavenge-worthy, as the raiders had stored everything from cartons of cigarettes to most of the various odds and ends I would need to build a poisoned needle gun. No medical supplies however. That hurt.

The grocery had long since been looted of any foodstuffs and the raiders had turned the interior into their camp; the disemboweled bodies of their victims hung from the ceilings between filthy mattresses and pots full of disgusting food. Pornographic and blasphemous graffiti covered everything. Velvet had insisted on coming into the grocery despite our warnings, but swiftly fled, vomiting into one of the mailboxes across the street.

Trotting to the corpse of the unicorn, I picked up the assault carbine with my teeth and struggled to put it into my saddle bags before giving up and carrying it around my neck by that strap along with my canteens. Calamity had stripped the other raider ponies of weapons and goods, leaving their barding behind; and now he was tearing apart their firearms and rebuilding better ones using the best parts. I trotted over to watch him; I had done the same thing before, but he was much better at it.

Velvet Remedy, looking a little worse for wear, called out to me as she trotted up. “There’s a safe in the crater that still looks intact, dear. Do you want to have a go at it?” I let her lead the way.

Mercifully, bobby pin and screwdriver was still within my abilities. As I tried to pick the lock, I asked Velvet, “We need a place to rest. What do you think of sleeping here?”

“In a raider town?” she asked incredulously. “Have you seen their décor? Beyond being unbelievably disgusting, it’s exceptionally unhealthy. I half suspect that the reason they were such easy targets for you two was that they were all impaired from disease. No offense.”

I nickered and focused on the safe.

“Besides, there could be more out… raiding. Do you really want to be asleep here when they come back?”

She had a good point. As tired as I was, this was a horrible place to bed down.

The safe opened with a click. Looking inside, I found another Stealth Buck and a copy of *Zebra Infiltration Tactics* (“Know Your Enemy!”), as well as several badly-aged documents and a number of slightly glowing magical energy grenades. A recorded message was tucked into the back. I downloaded it to my PipBuck and listened.

> *“I’m sending you one of the devices recovered from Shattered Hoof Ridge. Intelligence suggested that the zebras had developed invisibility spell fetishes, but this looks like something designed by the Ministry of Magic. It’s even PipBuck compatible. I hate to say it, but it looks like we’ve got traitors in our midst. If somepony in M.A.S. is leaking arcane technology to the zebras, the Princess will need to take action.”*

No voice I recognized, but this was the third Ministry I now knew by name. Third of six. Six heroic best friends; six Ministries. The Ministry of Morale and the Ministry of Peace were the only others I knew anything about… or were they? No, there was one other, although I hadn’t learned its name. The orange bucking pony statuette was clearly one of the limited edition magical artifacts that Pinkie… no Silver Bell had told us about. The cutie mark of three apples was identical to the design on the handle of Little Macintosh. The fact that I could mentally draw a line from one of Watcher’s heroines to a weapons factory guarded by pony-shaped robots with living brains in them made me cringe a little inside. I got the feeling I wasn’t going to like a lot of what I was bound to learn about these Ministries.

At least the Ministry of Peace seemed benign.

* * *

A curving set of train tracks cut a swath through the rolling, rocky hills and intersected with our path, so we had begun to follow it. It wasn’t exactly the right direction, but it was close, and I suspected the tracks would wind slowly back, probably leading all the way to Manehattan. Plus, it had the benefit of being relatively flat. All the hills were sapping me.

> *“No more living in this gilded cage,”* Velvet began to sing.
> *“Shackled to what is supposed to be.*
> *“I am ready to exit this stage; it is time for this bird to fly free.”*
> *“Ah’ve been blinded cuz Ah’ve closed muh eyes,”*

Calamity stepped in. His voice was no match for Velvet Remedy's but he carried a tune amazingly well.

"Seein' just what they told me t' see.
"Time t' get up an' shake off the lies;
break their rules, stretch muh wings and just leave!"

Wow. For the second time that morning, I fell to my haunches, my mouth hanging open. Velvet Remedy and Calamity continued their song, unaware that I had stopped and was staring at them. I threw myself back to my hooves and trotted to catch up.

There was a part of my spirit that was just welling with happiness, seeing my friends like this. A part of my mind that was in constant squee at hearing Velvet writing a new song. And there was an annoyingly earth-ponyish part of me that insisted these two were alerting everything in our vicinity that we were here. I suspected Velvet Remedy didn't know any better – for having been in the wasteland several hours longer than I, she had less experience with traveling through it; and her mind seemed more inclined to other paths of thought. Calamity, on the other hoof, probably just didn't care. There weren't many threats out here that he couldn't just fly away from, and I assumed he sometimes forgot he was traveling with two earth-bound ponies.

I studiously ignored that part of me. For now, the song was helping me keep my legs working.

As we rounded a steep hill, Velvet Remedy and Calamity's song reached an abrupt end. "I have no idea yet what to do for the bridge," Velvet admitted a little sheepishly. "But the chorus is strong."

Calamity agreed, having taken a real shine to the project. Spreading his wings, he swooped up to land on a tall rock jutting from the hilltop then crouched down. "Got somethin' ahead" He glided back down to us. "There's a batch o' ponies clustered 'round a heap o' vehicles all mashed together." Calamity checked the load on his battle saddle. "They look like they could be raiders…"

"Look like?" I said warningly.

Calamity paused, blushing. "Yeah… well… um, better t' approach cautiously. Safer rather than sorrier an' all that. Fortunately, they ain't seen us yet, so…"

"You sure about that, pony?" said a gravelly voice from the air above us. The armored griffin thudded down in front of us in a battle stance – talons sharp as razors, a jagged scar running up her beak and across where her left eye had once been, and a tri-barreled magical energy shotgun in a quick-draw holster under her breast.

* * *

The battle-scarred griffin was named Gawd, and we were her "guests". I must admit, I found her… impressive.

Gawd marched us up the tracks towards what my PipBuck labeled Junction R-7. Calamity's "heap o' vehicles" turned out to be an old, rusted train and a stack of wagons forming a barricade over the tracks. The train cars were strange – I had never seen cattle cars before. The wheels on the engine were missing. From the cactus vines growing over much of it, Junction Seven hadn't seen moving traffic for at least a decade.

Ponies had converted the trapped train into a guard outpost. Rusty sheet metal formed sheltered huts jutting out from the wagon stack. From the stench of manure, the old switchhouse on the opposite side was their outhouse. Velvet Remedy lifted a hoof to her nose, eyes watering.

Calamity noticed me eyeing the cattle cars. "Ah've heard stories of slavers usin' those t' transport slaves long distances over the rails," he muttered, adding after a moment's thought, "Never seen it with muh own eyes though." Taking in the size of the cattle cars then the number of them on this train, it struck me: that's a lot of slaves!

On the other hoof, these ponies were certainly not using them for the buying and selling of ponies. They were dressed in the same sort of makeshift armor that I had taken from the raiders, but a closer look revealed that several of them carried magical energy weapons of one sort or another. And as we neared, most of those weapons were swiftly pointed at us.

My ears flattened as I remembered one of the train ponies vaporized, leaving only glowing pink ash behind. It occurred to me only now that I had seen the same effect my first day outside – the Watcher-controlled sprite-bot had used a similar weapon on the bloatsprite. (So maybe the sprite-bots weren't entirely earth pony engineering after all.) Despite our situation, my thoughts jumped-track. What did Watcher say about bloatsprites? When you mix parasprites and Taint. Which is magical radiation, right? Or is it something different?

"Hoi!" Gawd called out. "Let 'em pass. Me an' these little ponies are going t' have a talk."

Hooves raised in greeting, several ponies echoing responding "hoi"s before returning to what they had been doing before. One brown mare with a missing leg was using her peg to jam spark batteries into the array for mounted multi-barrel magical energy cannon. A pink unicorn pony had several barrels stripped out of the cannon and was cleaning them with his horn. He moved slowly, like his motor skills were impared, but his telekinetic hornwork was fluid and precise. I could see old scars – dozens at least, possibly over a hundred – all down his back and legs. He'd been whipped to the edge of death. Many times.

I looked to my companions. Calamity had slowed down, giving the mounted weapon a curious eye. Velvet Remedy was more concerned, if not downright appalled, at the condition of some of the ponies.

A half-starved foal trotted out of a shadowed alcove of rusty metal, carrying a canteen around his neck which he offered to the each of the half-dozen ponies I could spot.

Velvet leaned close, whinnying nervously, "What are we getting into?"

With talon and wing, Gawd directed us into the single passenger car on the train, nestled up against the crippled engine. From the reek of dander inside, this was clearly the house of Gawd. Or, at least, her office.

"Close up the door," she ordered a blue-coated earth pony as she stepped inside behind us. The door swung shut with a metallic squeal, and I could hear braces thudding into place. We were locked in with the griffin.

Ironically, in better circumstances, I realized this would be a big tactical mistake for the griffin – three against one, and at least two of us could handle ourselves in combat. (It was odd, and somewhat uncomfortable to think of myself as somepony who could face a fight with confidence. Not for the first time, I had to wonder if the wasteland was changing me for the better, or just changing me.) Right now, however, with my levitation magic at its most feeble, we were probably hosed if this came to blows and guns. It was the same reasoning that had prompted me to accept Gawd's "invitation" in the first place. Things hadn't changed.

The room was spartanly furnished, save for the desk with a glowing terminal and a tattered black flag on the back wall showing wicked talons coming out of darkness. Gawd strutted around behind the desk, placed her talons on it, and faced us. I shook my head, trying to clear the webs of too little sleep when I caught myself musing that she'd look really attractive if she was a little closer to my age and, you know, a pony.

"First things first," Gawd glowered at the three of us. "Who are you ponies, and who do you work for?"

Calamity bristled. "Ah could ask ya the same thing!"

"Mind yer manners, pegasus! You're in our territory and in my home. I ask, you answer."

I put a steadying hoof on Calamity's flank, indicating that this was okay. Stepping forward, "I'm Littlepip. This is Calamity and Velvet Remedy. We're just passing through." We also had an increasingly desperate need for a place to sleep, but I wasn't going to reveal that, much less suggest we sleep anywhere near here.

"Did Mister Topaz give you permission to cross our territory?"

Something made me suspect a trick question. But before I could formulate a strategic response, Velvet Remedy asked, "Who's Mister Topaz?"

The grizzled griffin leaned over the desk and locked Velvet Remedy with her one good eye. "Say again?" She stared at Velvet appraisingly.

Velvet Remedy stood up straight. "You asked us about Mister Topaz, somepony I'd never heard of before. I asked you who that was. What's so difficult about that?"

I had to force myself not to facehoof.

However, Gawd apparently saw something in Velvet that impressed on her that the unicorn was sincere. The griffin sat back, "You really don't know, do you?" A smile slowly crossed her beak, her scar turning it into something unpleasant. "Well now, isn't that interesting!" She tapped her talon-tips together as she considered us.

"Well?" Velvet Remedy prompted.

Gawd leaned back, smiling quite a lot now. "Mister Topaz is the lord and master of Shattered Hoof and all territories adjacent."

Calamity nickered. "Ah call horseapples. This ain't anywheres close t' Shattered Hoof Ridge."

Gawd rolled her eyes. "No. But you are less than half an hour's flight from Shattered Hoof, the rock-breaking compound, which was named after Shattered Hoof, the battle."

"Rock-breaking compound."

Gawd facewinged. "Really? Surely you understand rock-breaking." She stared at out uncomprehending faces, then sighed. "Sometimes rocks have gems in them. Unless you got a unicorn who can tell you which ones do and which ones don't, y'have to break them open to see what's inside. Fer crying out loud, you had to have passed at least *one* of the rock farms in order to get here."

Velvet Remedy raised an eyebrow, confused. "How do you farm *rocks?*"

"Ugh. Easy. You pick a plot of land where rocks have shown a higher likelihood of hiding gems and you farm them!" We were clearly not impressing the griffin with our ignorance. Waving a talon, "Some ponies even used to rotate the rocks around from one field to the other to help improve the chances of gems…"

"That doesn't make any sense," I blurted, interrupting. It wasn't like the gems grew in the rocks like seeds, after all. My mind twinged.

Calamity only made it worse by suggesting, "Ah think it's tradition."

"Well it's a stupid tradition," I argued back. "These are rocks. Gems aren't magical; a rock isn't going to be any more likely to have gems in it if you give the rock loving care, or extra sunlight or better dirt to sit on."

"Well, gems could be magical. Ah mean, how many magical artifacts use gems? Y'need gems t' build magical energy weapons. They use 'em t' focus an' amplify th' energies."

I stared. First, that was way more technical expertise on anything related to the arcane sciences than I ever expected from Calamity. Second, it had never actually occurred to me that gems *might* be magical.

Gawd sat in front of us, impatiently waiting. After a silent pause, I turned back to her. "I think we're done now. Please continue."

* * *

Gawd had a job for us. Promised bottle caps and safe passage in return.

Naturally, we had some questions. Starting with, "Why us?"

"Because you ponies aren't from around here. You've got no loyalties t' any of the people hereabouts. An' that makes you free to operate where I can't, do things a member of Mr. Topaz's employ couldn't get away with." She gave us a narrow look. "You getting me?"

I nodded slowly. "You want us to do something that you can't do without being disloyal to Mister Topaz."

"But isn't it still disloyal to hire somebody else to do your dirty work?" Velvet Remedy questioned.

Gawd glowered. "Now look here. I have only two loyalties. To the contract, and to bottle caps. And in that order." She leaned back, looking over her shoulder at the flag behind her. "My old crew learned that when they decided t' take up Red Eye's offer and turn over the caravan we were hired t' protect t' Red Eye's slavers." She turned back to us. "Talons don't break contracts. Not even for barrels of caps. They learned that the hard way when I shot 'em in the back."

Her smile turned grim, "It was a point of honor."

Shooting your friends in the back didn't sound like any code of honor I could understand. Still, Gawd's words opened up a whole flood of new questions from us, stampeding one after another. Gawd was gracious enough, for a little while, to answer.

"Red Eye, that guy on the sprite-bots, he runs the slavers?"

"Yes. Ironic isn't it. He preaches all that horseshit about peace and unity and building a better tomorrow, and he's been building it on the backs of hundreds of slaves. I can't understand how so many of you ponies buy into his hypocritical rubbish."

"But griffins don't?"

"Hell no. He couldn't pay enough to make me bite into his poisoned apple." Gawd grimaced, adding, "Not that he's offering. No Unity for griffins. We're just hired wings to him."

"And the griffins will work for him?"

"Yes." Gawd seemed to take that as either offensive or stupid. Or possibly offensively stupid. "The Talons will work for whoever pays. Slavers, raiders, good little townsfolk, caravans. Whoever's got the caps. We don't play politics and we don't takes sides. Unless, of course, it's in the contract. That's been the griffin way for over two hundred years. Red Eye, he gets that. And unlike some folk, he has no reservations 'bout strengthening his forces with our kind."

"Talons?"

"The Talons," Gawd boasted, looking back at the flag, "Have been the best mercs in the Equestrian Wasteland since before Equestria was a wasteland." She thumped her armor proudly. "Can't hire yerself any better."

"Why does…?"

But Gawd had finally reached the end of her conversational composure. "Enough! I'm not your fucking teacher. I'm the one who is hiring you to perform a service. Get it done, and done right, you can ask me everything you want to as I lead you safely out of here."

I looked to my companions. The chore itself shouldn't be too hard. It was, after all, right in my skill set. I'd barely need the magic I barely had.

Gawd clicked her talons together again. "Oh, one last thing."

Why did I know I wasn't going to like this? "What?"

"Collateral." Gawd smiled, a cold and friendless smile. "Not that I don't trust you. But I need to make sure you don't plan t' march in there and tell Deadeyes all about our little arrangement. So… one of you is staying behind with me."

"Oh hell no," Calamity all but growled.

"Or, maybe instead…" I suggested reasonably, "You could sit on my horn and spin."

Gawd actually smirked at that. She opened her talons in a wave. "If you decide you don't want the job, yer free t' go. I'll just have the ponies outside open up that door, and tell them you're not under my protection anymore." She raised an eyebrow, pretending to give us time to mull over the non-choice. "You do the job, this is the way you do it."

Okay, not so attractive. I glared at the griffin. "Fine. You can have me." I winced a moment later, and clarified, "As your prisoner."

Gawd contemplated that for less than a moment. "No." A razor-sharp talon jabbed the air in Velvet Remedy's direction. "She will stay."

My mind echoed Calamity's words: oh hell no! I opened my mouth, expecting the stream of profanity working its way to my tongue would shock even a raider. But Velvet Remedy pre-empted me.

"Agreed."

"What?!" I turned towards her, aghast.

Velvet merely nodded. "There are ponies here that I might be able to tend to. And your special skills are needed for this undertaking…"

"Wait," Gawd interrupted. "'Tend to?' Don't tell me you're another Preacher."

Velvet Remedy fixed the griffin with a stare of her own. "Maybe you should have asked more about me *before* insisting that I stay here with you."

Calamity passed me the binoculars and crouched back down behind a formation of boulders lining the hilltop. I took them and looked down into a small, unnatural valley surrounded by ridges.

Several rows of tracks cut through the valley, ending at the iron-gated mouth of a fortress. Walls of concrete and barred windows rose up from the ground surrounding a courtyard, most of which was barely visible through a roof of razor-wire (although there was a gaping hole in the razorwire towards one side that somepony on a better day could drop boxcars through). The broken remains of a road, cut up by multiple concrete barriers, terminated at a second gate of thick metal beneath the watch of a guard tower. I could see a scarce few ponies walking between it and the towers.

Shattered Hoof Re-Educational Stockyard

"Reforming aberrant morality through hard work and loving care."

We had been warned that the surrounding valley had been mined. The road would be a killing zone. And even if I went it alone using the Stealth Buck, I doubted I would be able to get through that door. It looked like it only opened from the inside. If we were going to sneak in, there was only one way to go. I looked at Calamity and saw that he had come to the same conclusion.

"Ah figure we wait 'till it gets a bit darker, then Ah fly you in."

I nodded. "Are you sure your wing's up for it?"

Calamity stretched out his bandaged wing and gave it a few flaps. "Ayep. Good t' go. Take more'n a bullet t' take me out of the sky." He quickly added, "When Ah'm not pullin' an apple cart, at least."

A shadow passed over his expression as he looked at his bandaged wing. Flying in still had risk. A dark, pony-shaped blotch against the sky – somepony might spot that, particularly if they're on the lookout for griffins. I didn't want to risk Calamity getting shot again. And the Stealth Buck couldn't conceal both of us. I mulled over the problem until an idea struck me. It could help, but I hated asking Calamity to fly on his wounded wing. (Even if he had just suggested it.)

"Calamity, remember those mattresses back at the grocery?" I asked.

An hour later, with the clouded sky darkening, Calamity gently circled down towards the huge hole in the razor wire above the rock-breaking yard. His forelegs wrapped around me. And I in turn strained my telekinesis to keep the cover sheet from one of the raider outpost mattresses flying along beneath us. The mottled, mostly-grey color of the rectangle camouflaged our shapes against the sky.

Shattered Hoof had become the home of escaped slaves, many from the train that had been ambushed at Junction R-7, who had turned to a life of raiding the local farms. The very idea made my stomach tighten. Having fought to save several captured ponies, risked my life and those of my friends (not to mention the lives of innocent train ponies) to give them freedom, the mere idea that some former slaves would turn to the most vile sorts of barbarism made my skin want to tear itself off.

Their leader was a pony named Deadeyes, who spoke for a supposedly higher pony whom no one but Deadeyes had ever seen: Mister Topaz. It was for Mister Topaz that

Deadeyes organized raiding parties out of Shattered Hoof and kept the rock-breaking yards in operation.

Inside that fortress, Gawd had told us, secure in Deadeyes' office, was a safe. In the safe was a ledger. Gawd wanted it. She didn't say why.

Honestly, I had my own reasons for wanting to take a look at that.

Deftly, Calamity arrowed through the torn section of razor wire and landed us gently at one edge of the yard. "Y'see?" he whispered cockily, "Nothin' to it!

Not more than a heartbeat later, two Shattered Hoof Raiders trotted by. Calamity and I backed into the shadows, and I pulled the mattress cover over us. We held our breaths.

"Didja hear something?" I heard one ask the other.

"Yeah. My stomach. Growling."

They seemed to pause there for several long seconds. The stench creeping off of the fabric began to make my eyes water and my stomach twist in knots. I was afraid I would sneeze or vomit.

Finally, I heard their hooves clop away. Tossing the wretched cover aside, I sucked in fresh air. Then Calamity and I slid along the wall to the first door we could find. It was locked. That didn't last long.

⁂

"Not the safe yer supposed t' be pickin'," Calamity commented as he stood guard by the door.

We'd managed to break into the Visitor's Center of the re-educational… let's face it, prison. The posters on the walls had pictures of smiling, happy ponies bucking at rocks and revealing beautiful gems, or carrying said gems to facility matrons who just glowed with approval. ("Here, we teach those poor ponies who have lost their way how to reconnect with ponykind!" one banner boasted. Another: "It's not long before our guests find themselves taking pride in good, hard work that supports the war effort!")

There simply weren't enough facehoofs in the world to express my feelings.

Two vending machines stood side-by-side next to Calamity, their lights flickering. Both had been pried open and emptied of Sparkle~Cola and Sunrise Sarsaparilla respectively (the latter machine bearing an image of the Goddess Celestia raising the sun over happy Sarsaparilla drinkers.) We had, however, managed to loot a fair bit of old pre-war coins from both machines.

"It'll just take a moment," I replied, floating up bobby pin and screwdriver. The safe I was working on was not Deadeyes'; it was the storage safe for valuables in the Visitor's Center Lost and Found. This part of the building didn't even connect internally to the prison proper. We would have to brave the yard again and try another door.

Calamity shook his head. "Honestly, Ah don't feel right. Ah don't know why we're doin' this. Ain't we helpin' raiders?"

I paused. The feeling had occurred to me too. "We're doing this because we're not in any condition to fight these people. It would be tough if we were fully rested and healthy." I took a deep breath, "Plus, this is a chance to dig a little into what's going on."

"Ah don't really care 'bout what's goin' on in a raider camp. 'Cept for how Ah c'n put a stop t' it."

I turned to Calamity and shook my head. “No, not just here. Everywhere.” I was beginning to put together something in my head that I didn’t much like. “I’ve been seeing things that suggest that this isn’t situation normal for the Equestrian Wasteland. My first night outside, I was captured by slavers. They marched right up to a raider bridge expecting to have to pay a toll, and instead the raiders started shooting. At the time, I just took it as luck; but I don’t think so anymore.”

Calamity gave me a considering look, weighing the ideas I was putting forth.

“That pseudo-goddess at old Appleloosa, she was new. The slavers there hadn’t seen anything like her before. But somepony named Stern sent that bitch here from Fillydelphia to oversee things. And that happened, what, a week or two ago?”

I returned my focus to the safe. “Something’s going on out here, and that pony Red Eye is in the center of it. Whatever it is, it has been building up for a long time…” I searched for the right words; with a mental lightning flash, they came to me. “It’s like a river in a storm that is just now on the verge of breaking its banks and flooding everything.”

Calamity sat down, tipping his hat back as he and gave that a good pondering.

“Ah suppose that makes sense.” Calamity chuckled, “’Sides, how often c’n Ah say Ah’m on a mission from…”

“Don’t.”

Calamity nickered. “Ah guess not even once.”

My bobby pin broke. Slipping out another, I tried again. I had a distinct urge to see the contents of this safe, based on one of the last prewar entries on the Visitor’s Center terminal. The terminal itself had been encrypted so tightly that the Shattered Hoof Raiders had never been able to access it.

Entry 42:

Just got word that Shattered Hoof will be closing down the Visitor’s Center portion of this facility. The Ministry of Morale has decreed that the friends and family of ponies who have been determined guilty of sedition or treason will no longer have the right to visit our guests until rehabilitation is deemed complete, for fear that our guests might spread their poison to their loved ones. As such, this is going to be my last entry.

Fortunately, the severance package will be generous. I plan to take my family and move to Cloudsdayle. The world below is just a little too ugly for me to be raising my foals in.

We’ve done our best to contact ponies with items still in the Lost & Found, and most of what remains will be mailed out today. Unfortunately, we’ve had no luck reaching our recent guest entertainer. Sweetie Belle has apparently fallen off the face of Equestria. I’ve taken care to store her belongings in the safe.

It amuses me that we shut this office down just after we repainted. If somepony had said something sooner, we could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble. (Not to mention Tiara’s new dress, although the rest of us are upset about that. That mare is unbearable.)

It cost me a bobby pin, but the safe finally opened. (I would discover later, to my chagrin, that I could have just opened it via the terminal had I been more patient.)

Inside was a single package. Carefully, I pulled it out with my teeth and set it on the ground. I gave a tug on the drawstring with my teeth and it opened easily. I was stunned to see a statuette of a jaw-droppingly gorgeous white unicorn with a sensual purple mane and tail, and a darling three-gem cutie mark. (There were other things in the package too, but I totally forgot about them.)

“Are ya done visually molestin’ that statue, girl?” Calamity’s words disrupted my reverie. He looked impatient. I blushed hotly.

“She’s a looker, Ah’ll give ya that. But Ah’m guessin’ she wouldn’t much appreciate the way yer lookin’ at ’er.”

“I was… just… looking…” I stammered, then focused all my energy to floating up the statue and slipping it into my bag. I knew I was risking burning myself out completely, but just had to keep her! And I didn’t want to risk marring the statuette with my teeth. The statuette trembled, not wanting to rise from the ground. Then I felt a surge of magical energy, and the statuette floated up gracefully. Whatever blessing this one had bestowed, it had rejuvenated my horn. Just a little, but enough to float the statuette and even Little Macintosh. I turned the hot, gorgeous mare around in the air until I could read the engraving.

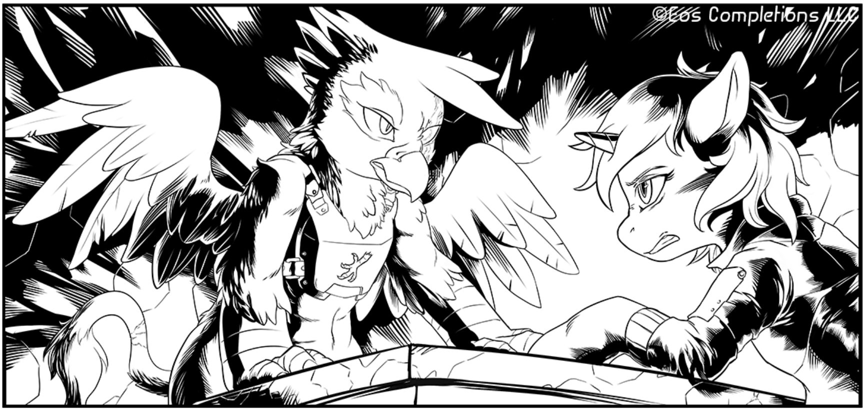
“Be Unwavering!”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Stable Shot – Your attacks are smooth, graceful and precise. You have a higher chance to score a critical hit on an opponent in combat, equivalent to 5 extra points of Luck.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Factions



"Didn't know anyone would willingly walk into this place, not unless they were looking for trouble."

"Gone.

"Everypony in Manehattan is just… gone. I-I was talking with my best friend, Silver Spoon, over terminal chat when the connection went dead. My… my best friend is dead. Only she's… she's not… laying dead somewhere. One minute she was talking to me, telling me about the concert she went to last night at Hoofbeats, and then she was just gone. Erased.

"Th-they say the ponies in a few of the Ministries' buildings might have survived… but that doesn't sound real. Shattered Hoof is more than two days trot from Manehattan, and some of the guards said they could hear the megaspell go off. It was unnatural, alien… not like a real sound. A few of the guards ventured up the highest ridge. They came back describing a huge pillar of perverted green fire with a strange rainbow sheen, wrapped with rings of black smoke, lifting up into the clouds from just over the horizon where Manehattan is supposed to be.

"Now they're saying Cloudsdayle was hit too. And that Equestria's own megaspells have already been cast back at the zebras. Oh… oh no… will the zebras hit Ponyville? It's so small! They wouldn't, would they? I… I've got to warn mom and dad!

"Maybe they can get into the Stable at Sweet Apple Acres. Oh please, oh please, it's got to still be open! Last week, Silver Spoon told me that Stable-Tec was filing ponies into the Stables around Manehattan, but that was only as some sort of test run. Nothing for ponies to panic about. It's not like they knew…"

I turned off the log. While it had played, several others had been downloaded into my PipBuck. I had been finding bits of this pony's audio diary scattered all about the guardhouse. I had pulled an earbloom from my armored utility barding and tuned it into my PipBuck, allowing me to listen to the recordings in one ear without giving away my position.

Calamity returned from scouting ahead, signaling with his tail that the path was clear.

Movement through Shattered Hoof was proving swifter than I felt we had any right to expect. Our progress was partially due to keeping our hoofprints as small as possible – no lining our saddlebags with items that could be missed. (I made an exception for the contents of the Lost & Found safe, justifying the theft with the reminder that the safe had not been opened since before the megaspells, and so no pony here would be suspicious if it was empty, so long as I closed and locked it again.)

But more than that, these ponies didn't seem to consider that the fortress could be infiltrated; they weren't on guard. I'm not a mistress of shadow, but I hardly needed the advanced tutelage from *Zebra Infiltration Tactics* to slip past ponies whom were being this oblivious. (I'd skimmed through the book while Calamity was fetching the mattress cover.) Calamity wasn't quite as good and had nearly tipped a Shattered Hoof Raider to his presence twice now, but we'd managed to hide each time. I figured once we got back to the train-fort of Gawd, I'd pass him *Zebra Infiltration Tactics* to peruse himself. (It's not as if books can only be read once, after all.)

The inside of Shattered Hoof proper was a cold, monotonous grey – much like maintenance in Stable Two, except here all the walls were cracked and chipped, the ceiling decayed, the light weak and uneven, cast from small lanterns hung from railroad spikes chiseled into the walls. The darkening sky of clouds outside turned the high-set, barred windows into dead eyes staring vacantly into the halls. Somewhere down the hall, a terribly sad song was playing over a radio – we were within the range of DJ Pon3's broadcast again.

"…Ponies on the expressway, with no features, with no faces,
Ponies milling about me, trudging off to nameless places…"

The song pulled a melancholy chord in my heart; the singer somehow managing to make the Equestria of before the war seem as dreary and bleak as the wasteland itself. As I followed Calamity, I considered turning on one of the other entries from the audio diary just to drown it out; but I realized that with it playing in only one ear, the two would likely mix into something even more depressing.

"…Waiting foals, for their birthday; have a party, please be happy,
Growing up all too swiftly; losing hopes of what they might be…"

⁂

"Well, crap!" I muttered dourly as I hugged a shadow behind a placard ("Hard Work is Happy Work!") and stared across the open rows of desks to the well-lit room beyond. Inside, a pony matching Gawd's description of Deadeyes was sitting behind a desk, reading a book (*Applied Gemstones*). He was flanked by at least one guard pony that I could see, and possibly others I could not. The safe was directly behind him. There was no way to get at it stealthily. Even if I used the Stealth Buck, he'd hear the safe opening less than a foot away from his ears.

"Time for our backup plan," I whispered to Calamity. "Got one?"

Calamity raised his eyebrows, “Yeah. Load ’em all up in the caboose an’ kick it free.” I winced as he reminded me how well one of his last plans had gone.

“Could be worse,” he whispered with a smile. “Ah’m sure Velvet’s plan would be t’ go up an’ ask ’im nicely.”

I closed my eyes. Damn it. We couldn’t just sit here, waiting for the bastard to move. The longer we hung around, the better chance of getting caught. “Okay,” I said finally. “We’ll do that.”

Calamity’s eyes went wide. “Ah was joking!” he hissed.

Thankful to the hot mare statuette for returning some of my telekinetic magic, I carefully levitated my sniper rifle and assault carbine to Calamity. “Take these. Go back and hide in that side room with all the old flashlights,” I instructed, recalling a room that looked like it hadn’t been used for anything other than a few quickies in several months. “I’ll go up and say hello.”

“An’ when they all shoot ya, then what’s the plan?”

“I’m winging this here, but if all else fails, I still have the Stealth Buck. That should get me out. If shooting starts, don’t wait for me. Get safely back to Remedy.” With an afterthought, “Please.”

Calamity scowled and moved off, muttering something under his breath about the wisdom of leaving “winging it” to non-pegasus ponies. I started up another audio log, listening while I gave Calamity time to position himself safely away. The voice of the same mare leapt through my earbloom, sounding panicked.

> *“The communication web is down. I tried and tried to reach mom and dad, but I couldn’t get through. At first, it seemed that the web was flooded, and my calls kept getting bounced. Then it just died completely.*
>
> *“We can’t reach any of the Ministry of Morale hubs either. No pony was expecting the one in Manehattan to respond, but not even Canterlot? Could… the zebras couldn’t possibly have destroyed Canterlot! Could they? What… what happened to Princess Luna??”*

Having heard of the Canterlot Ruins, I knew the answer. I toggled to the next log.

> *“It’s starting to rain outside; it was bright and sunny less than an hour ago. I think the pegasus ponies are mourning Cloudsdayle.*
>
> *“Most of the guards are gone now. They’ve left me the codes to open the cells. Scoops said it was up to me. Nopony else was going to risk setting our guests free. Why me? I-I’m not the one who’s supposed to be in charge!*
>
> *“If I don’t, these ponies will starve to death in here! But if I do… some of them are Really Bad Ponies. Some have even confessed to helping the zebras at Shattered Hoof Ridge when they tried to assassinate Princess Celestia. If I let them go… who knows what harm they might do? What is worse? Letting them die here? Or inflicting them on a wounded, suffering Equestria?*
>
> *“No, no, no! I’m just an inspector. I’m not supposed to make these kinds of decisions!*
>
> *“Mom? Dad? Silver Spoon? What should I do?”*

I wasn’t sure why I was listening to these logs now. Curiousity? Or maybe, in a way, I was paying my respects to the past by listening? By learning?

Either way, it didn’t matter. Time to go.

"How'd you get in here?" Deadeyess scowled, staring down at me. I had three magical energy weapons pointed at my head (although the big, brutish pony to Deadeyess's left looked like he'd rather kill me with his teeth).

"I…" Dammit, think! Watcher might call honesty a virtue, but sometimes the ability to lie your tail off is a virtue too. "…used magic. I am a unicorn, after all." I felt a rush of relief – that had sounded plausible. Even I might have bought it if I didn't already know how much I suck at spells.

"Better question is: why?"

"Why? Why I came in here?"

"No, why are fillies different than colts." The slate grey pony's voice dripped with sarcasm. "What do you think?"

Stammering, I realized I should have thought my approach through a lot better. "I-I wanted to…" I glanced away, mentally searching for inspiration. My eyes fell on a framed news article, yellowed with age, which featured a faded picture of a pretty unicorn. ("Sweetie Belle Performs Patriotism Concert at Shattered Hoof"). My eyes snapped back to meet Deadeyess's own. "…to join your crew. You're all escaped slaves, right? Well, I just escaped from old Appleloosa."

I realized just after I said it that I was wearing armored Stable barding and probably looked nothing like an escaped slave. Deadeyes was regarding me with deep and well-deserved suspicion.

If they started shooting, I was probably dead. Small and fast is helpful against long-range gunfire, but not so much against point-blank shots from weapons that will melt you into a puddle. Worse, my heart sank when I realized that Calamity would almost certainly share my fate. From what I knew of my new friend, running and hiding weren't in his normal book of tactics. No matter what I told him to do, I suspected he'd choose to join in the firefight.

"Tell you what, filly," Deadeyes seemed to finally decide, fixing me with a glare. "Let's see how you do with a couple of errands. Show yourself to be useful, and we'll chat again."

I gulped. Well, at least he hadn't shot me yet. "What do you need me to do?"

"I have a letter that needs to be delivered. Not far, just to Yellow Hill Ridge. Maybe an hour's trot. I've got a map you can download to your PipBuck. Deliver it, come right back, we'll talk again."

As he pushed the sealed envelope across his desk to me, I wondered if it said something like "Kill the pony carrying this letter."

"Oh, and you'll need this legband. It will let Gawdyna know you're okay to pass through."

"Who?" I asked as I slipped on the legband, feigning ignorance.

"The bitch of a griffin who runs our welcoming committee. Honestly, she's more trouble than she's worth; but the boss seems to like her, so she stays. For now."

"The boss? I thought you were the boss."

Deadeyes clearly did not have the patience for questions that Gawd did. "Scramble, if she talks again, start pulling off her legs."

The grin on the brute to Deadeyes' left widened eagerly. I left quickly and wordlessly.

* * *

I hadn't gotten far before one of Deadeyes' guards came trotting out after me. He motioned for another, seemingly random, Shattered Hoof pony to flank me on the other side. Without words, it was clear they were making sure I "found my way out."

As we approached the small room where Calamity was hiding, I blurted out as loudly as I could without sounding suspicious, "So, escorting ponies out. Is that your official job? Are you the escorter-outer?"

"Shut up," Deadeyes' guard said warningly, but the other replied easily.

"Actually, no. I'm just a rock-breaker."

I raised an eyebrow. "A rock-breaker? So what's your story?"

He seemed amiable enough. "Slavers assaulted my family homestead. My brother and I fought back, while my wife tried to hide our foals. They killed my brother, took my lovely Sugarplum and the foals and left me for dead." As he spoke, a cloud passed over his face. His eyes narrowed and a tone of sadness tinged with seething crept into each word. "Crawled myself here for the protection. I'm not a raider. Don't do any of that shit. Just work the rocks and thank the Goddesses that I'm not alone out in the wastes."

I nodded solemnly. What else could I do? In the heavy quiet that followed, I could hear that radio playing in some nearby room. The music had stopped, and DJ Pon3 was reporting the news.

"…been warning everypony for some time now to steer clear of Appleloosa. Well, seems like the Stable Dweller either didn't get the message, or chose to ignore it. I've gotten confirmed reports that the little gal marched into Appleloosa, and brought hell on her hooves. Freed over a dozen slaves, many of them foals. I'm happy to report that they're safe and sound. But there's a bitter note to this song. When a small army of slavers tried to take their captives back, our heroine of the wasteland sacrificed herself making sure everypony got away safe. So this next song goes out to you, Stable Dweller. May Celestia and Luna wrap you in Their tails…"

I stumbled, missing a step, my mind shocked by rapid realizations. The radio was talking about me. Again. The poor ponies I helped to freedom had made it safely. I was dead! …Well, according to the radio; somepony must have assumed I had died in the train crash. Either that, or somepony who knew better lied.

I wanted to stop, go back, hear the rest of it. To kick or shout at the radio to somehow make it repeat everything from the beginning.

"Keep moving!" Deadeyes' guard barked as I fell momentarily behind. I trotted faster to put myself back between them.

Looking at the guard, I asked him this time, "And what's your story?"

With a glare, "I won my place here in the annual Stomp an Annoying Unicorn to Death competition."

Back to being quiet it was then. We were taking a slightly different, more direct path back to the yard than the one Calamity and I had used. The hall we were passing by now had several doorways opening onto a combination of amphitheatre and mess hall. There was an old stage in the back with tattered and befouled curtains which I imagined

Sweetie Belle, the mare who would become Stable Two's first Overmare, performed on. The room was crowded haphazardly with tables and benches and several dozen raider ponies scarfing a pale stew, the odor of which was mixing unpleasantly with the stench of unbathed ponies and an under-scent of dry rot.

I kicked on the next log on my PipBuck to distract me.

> *"I wasn't fast enough. I should have known better. No wonder the rest of the staff fled so quickly. I should have known that Shattered Hoof would go into lockdown as soon as the mainframe realized we were cut off from the outside. Assisted jailbreak prevention protocols. By the time I made my decision and released the guests from their cells, we were already all trapped inside.*
>
> *"I know how the weaker ones fare. I can only imagine what they will do to me when they find a member of the staff got locked in with them.*
>
> *"I took the food from the guardhouse fridge and locked myself into this bathroom. I locked several other doors too. With luck, they will think it's normal for this door to be locked as well. Because if they really try to break it down, I'm sure they can.*
>
> *"I've got maybe three days of food. Plenty of water. A little bit of medicine. I only hope it will last me long enough for them to find a way out of Shattered Hoof. My only chance is if they leave before they realize I'm here."*

⁂

As we exited into the yard, the guard turned on me, pushing me up against the wall. "You want to know my story?" he growled. "I'll tell you. I was a merchant on a caravan that Gawd's Talons were supposed to be guarding. Saw them try to buck us over to slavers, and saw her take them down. So how'd I get here? She flew me in. Just like we all know she flew you in."

My ears tilted. I could feel the stone wall grinding into my backside.

"I used to be one of those ponies out there, following Gawd. But you don't become a good merchant if you can't read changes in the market. So I made my allegiances with Deadeyes," the merchant-turned-guard informed me, his voice rumbling with warning. "Gawd's heading for the chopping block. And trust me, you don't want to be standing on the wrong side when the axe comes down."

The two then turned from me. The other one chuckling, "You go 'teleport' out now." They left me in the rock yard, locking the door behind them. Looking around the yard, I realized that any structure designed to hold ponies prisoner would have wards to prevent unicorns from just teleporting out. It was a rare magical ability, but one they would anticipate.

I moved over to where the mattress cover had been thrown and hid myself, clicking another audio log as I waited for Calamity. The voice was soft, nearly drowned out by the sounds of heated argument in the background.

> *"Out of food. Made what I had stretch… I think. No real way to tell time in here, but I think its been a week. At least four days. After the food was gone, I raided the garbage can. Some old apple cores… they were brown, mushy and tasted horrid.*
>
> *"The guests outside are doing much worse. There was less than two days food in the pantry when we went into lockdown. Now they're starving. I-I can hear them*

outside… arguing about who they're going to eat first! Oh nonono. They can't! It's beyond horrific– "

The pony's voice was cut off by a muffled scream. The chaos in the background heightened, and I could clearly make out a pony shouting "Carve her up!"

"NO! Oh nonononono! Don't make me hear this! Celestia, Luna, please! I can't hear this!… "

* * *

Night hugged us in its darkness as Calamity carried me towards Yellow Hill Ridge. "Now why are we helpin' this Deadeyes feller again?"

"Still trying to get a chance at that safe for Gawd. Remember Velvet."

"Ayep," he said dourly. We flew in silence a few more minutes before, "Where's this place supposed t' be again? Ah can't see a damn thing out here tonight."

I had the location marked on my PipBuck's automap, but I hesitated to lift my leg and look; shifting myself around while being carried by a flying pegasus seemed unwise. Instead, I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle to check the compass.

Nothing. Either I had forgot to set the compass to keep track of Yellow Hill Ridge, or we were off course.

"Dagnabit, Ah overshot!" Calamity banked, the cool night wind cutting through my coat and mane. The turn brought a number of flickering lights into view. "Is that what we're lookin' for? Looks like a whole mess o' campers t' me."

I checked my E.F.S. Now I could see the marker; it was pulsing at the very edge of my compass. "No, we're still off course. It's back that way."

Calamity didn't turn. "Hold on an' hush. Ah wanna see what this is then." He swooped a little lower, aiming to fly a pass above the lights. As we neared, I too could make out a mass of tents, cookpots, and ponies. And, as we drew closer, banners: red and black, a stylized white eye with a crimson iris dominating the center.

The ponies down there were armed, and there were a lot of them. I spotted two griffins amongst them. Talon mercenaries, by their armor, but wearing neckbands of red and black with the distinctive eye. Clearly not Gawd's Talons. Different company. Towards the back of the camp, I spotted the rows of slaver wagons.

Calamity beat his wings, grunting softly in pain as he pulled us higher into the darkness, hopefully before any of those below had taken a glance up. "Well, ain't this a barrel of bad apples."

"Calamity," I whispered, not able to un-hear that grunt. "Your wing…"

"Ah'm fine. Hush now."

We continued to fly. I was now keeping a closer eye on my E.F.S. compass. Yellow Hill Ridge was a quarter-mile back towards Shattered Hoof, with just enough hills between to have ensured that we wouldn't have spotted the camp had we come straight to it. This time, I spotted the tiny speck of the waiting courier's lantern. I suggested to Calamity that we fly past and let me trot up alone, coming from the expected direction.

* * *

Deadeyes clopped his hooves together, reading me. I had mentioned nothing of the Red Eye slaver army. “Good work,” he said finally. “Go get yourself some rest. You look like a griffin’s playtoy. Come back tomorrow. I’ll have one more job for you. Do that, and you’re in.”

With that, he waved me off. This time, to my surprise, no pony jumped to escort me. I was only a few yards down the hall when Deadeyes, accompanied by all his guards, simply walked out of his office, leaving the door open behind him. They turned, moving off in a different direction.

I stopped. The safe was unguarded. This was… almost too easy. No, it was definitely too easy.

I activated the Stealth Buck.

The safe was tricky, but within my range of skill. It popped open with a snap. The only thing inside was the ledger.

I slipped the ledger into my saddlebag and was just snapping the safe shut when Deadeyes and his entourage returned, looking around. If it hadn’t been for the spell, they would have seen me. Deadeyes began to trot around the back of his desk from the right, his brutish bodyguard circling from the left, trapping me. It didn’t matter if they could see me – the slightest bump would let them know I was here! As they drew closer, I scrambled up onto the desk itself.

The two other guards, one of them the ex-merchant, took their positions by the door. I turned on the desk, crouching, and prepared to crawl down and out between them. One of them shut the door.

Luna fuck me with the moon.

I turned slowly. Deadeyes had stopped and was staring at his safe.

“Think she took it?” the former merchant asked. My heart sank into my stomach.

“Oh, I think our little spy did whatever Gawdyna wanted her to do,” Deadeyes smiled. “All the better. Let the griffin cook herself.”

He turned to his guards. “Best prepare the others. Red Eye’s forces are set to raid Shattered Hoof the sunrise after tomorrow. We want to make sure they have no trouble getting in. It’s time to meet the big man himself.”

My mind reeled. Deadeyes was making deals with the slavers? He was going to let Red Eye’s forces come in and capture the ponies he was supposed to be protecting here? The treachery mirrored the betrayal of Gawd’s Talons but on a much larger scale.

Deadeyes strode behind his desk and clopped his hooves down on it forcing me to lift one of mine to avoid being touched. I could feel sweat break out across my forehead as I balanced silently.

Deadeyes leaned forward to grab his copy of Applied Gemstones in his teeth. With a fright, I realized I was standing on it. I lifted my hindleg away with just barely enough time. Now my balance was much more strenuous. My whole body was achy from sleep deprivation. I searched frantically for a place to put one of my raised hooves before I fell.

The door banged open. I toppled onto the floor with a thud as a pair of earth ponies burst in. Deadeyes jumped back, startled, his book dropping to the floor.

“Sir, sorry to interrupt, but we’ve got an intruder!”

Deadeyes stared at the two ponies. “Little unicorn girl, ’bout this high?” he asked casually, raising his hoof.

"No sir. This one's a pegasus!"

With the moon!

My PipBuck alerted me that the invisibility spell was about to wear off. I didn't have a choice. I lurched to my hooves and skirted around the ponies, barely slipping between them. Then dashed out through the open door.

⁂

I galloped to the meeting spot as fast as my weary legs could take me. Calamity was waiting for me, hidden under the mattress cover. "No need for that now. They spotted you. Got the ledger. Let's go!"

We were airborne in moments. I could tell how tired Calamity was; we kept dipping in the air. I winced at the workout we were giving his mending wing. "We get back to Gawd, and we sleep. No matter what else, we *have* to sleep!" He hadn't complained, but I could tell his wing was killing him.

I played another audio log. This time, the mare was no longer whispering, but I could still barely hear her over a thundering racket.

> *"Dammit. They know I'm in here. I woke from my nightmare with such a start that I kicked over the garbage can, and they heard it. They'll break through the door soon."*

I could hear one of the ponies on the other side of the bathroom door call out abysmally profane promises.

> *"I don't have to guess what they'll do to me anymore. They want me to know. But I'm not going to let them.*
>
> *"Go figure, this crappy little gun is going to save me after all. Used the handle to shatter the mirror. This is going to hurt… but if I do it quickly… it won't hurt for long."*

There was one audio log left.

Junction R-7 swam into view through the darkness. Exhausted, Calamity brought us in for a slightly rough landing. Ponies pointed glowing magical energy weapons at us from all directions. Gawd stepped forward. "Welcome back. I was beginning to worry about you two." She looked us over. "Got the ledger?"

I nodded shakily. "Yes. But before you look at it, I want to look at it. And there's something you should know."

Gawd raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" she asked appraisingly.

"Deadeyes knows. He pretty much let me steal it. I overheard him saying something about letting you cook yourself."

Gawd sat back, regarding me. Finally, "I'm impressed. You didn't have to tell me that." Then, with a narrow look, "So why did you? What's in it for you."

I swayed on my hooves. "There's more. But I'll only tell you that after my friends and I get some sleep. Here. Under the safety of your protection."

Gawd's beak broke into a grin, the scar twisting it on one side. "All right. You've got yourself a bargain." Pointedly, "But while you sleep, I want that ledger."

I nodded. "What I want out of it won't take long."

Gawd guided us back towards one of the cattle cars. As I stepped a hoof inside, I felt a rush of relief to see Velvet Remedy, curled on a bed of slightly moldy hay. She was talking softly with another pony as she watched over a third whose hindleg was wrapped in what had been some of our precious remaining bandages. I wondered how many medical supplies we had left, if any.

Velvet Remedy jumped up at our return, giving us a weak but bright smile. “What did you two do, take the scenic route?”

“Ayep. Somethin’ like that,” Calamity responded.

“And what did I say about this wing!” Velvet Remedy pushed Calamity towards the corner of the train car that had clearly become her impromptu clinic. “Let me take a look at it and change those bandages!”

Shaking my head in a combination of adoration and despair, I followed behind her. I was too tired to even appreciate how nice a tailside she had. Finding a bit of hay that looked filthy but soft, I curled down and levitated out the ledger. Flipping through, I found entries going back many years. The newest ones, I felt, were suspect. Whatever Deadeyes was up to, I rather expected he had doctored the ledger as part of it. But the older entries, faded as they were, couldn’t have been altered without being obvious. At least, not by an earth pony. (I found myself wondering what a forgery cutie mark would look like.)

It was easy to find the entry I was looking for:

> *Some of the nearby farmers have begun to put up resistance. Armed themselves from that merchant caravan that passed through last month. One of them took a few shots at the raider party I dispatched to the east side. Mr. Topaz doesn’t care, just wants the rocks to keep coming. So I think it’s time we reminded these rock farmers just why they do as we say. Tomorrow, I’m sending some of the boys up to the Bell farm to make an example. Told them to make it real graphic, so the rest of these ponies don’t have any room to misinterpret.*

I slammed the book closed with more telekinetic force than I thought I had left in me. The ledger went flying across the cattle car, bouncing off the far wall. Now I didn’t want to sleep. Now I wanted to march back in there, stuff Little Macintosh down Deadeyes’ throat, and open fire.

Instead, I got up, fetched the ledger, and walked out to have a talk with Gawd.

* * *

“So what now?”

Gawd looked up from the ledger, gazing at me from across her desk.

“Now? Now, you go t’ sleep. Tomorrow, we chat a bit over breakfast, then you’re free t’ go. By then, all the border patrols and outposts will know I’ve said you’re free t’ pass. You did the job. A verbal contract is still a contract, and I don’t renege.” Gawd frowned slightly. “Too bad, too. We could really use a skilled medic here.”

I let that sink in. Still, not really what I was looking for. “How about you?”

“What about me?”

I pointed a hoof at the ledger. “What do you do now?”

Gawd huffed, then drew herself up. “Mister Topaz contracted me to protect Shattered Hoof and its ponies from threats. Ain’t hard to argue that Deadeyes has become just such a threat." She jabbed the ledger with a talon. "I can't ignore this. I knew Deadeyes was up to something shady, but this is beyond the pale."

A little too on the nose, part of me thought. Almost like Deadeyes' treachery was custom tailored to get under Gawd's feathers. I told her as much.

She laughed, a bitter but still humored laugh. "Think I don't see that?"

I could guess what she must be planning. And another question surfaced in my brain. "What would you do with this place if you were in charge?"

She gave me a look.

"Shattered Hoof, I mean. What would you do?"

Slowly, evenly, she intoned, "I'm not in charge. I'm not going to be. Even with Deadeyes gone. Mister Topaz runs this joint, and I'm still contracted to him."

Right, I thought as I nodded. But what if you weren't?

⁂

Velvet Remedy approached me as I returned to the cattle car. I was so tired, but my heart still fluttered a little at her approach.

"So, is the griffin actually letting us go?"

I nodded. Velvet Remedy looked surprised more than relieved. "We get to spend the night. We need sleep…"

"I would insist. Calamity's done more damage to his wing with all that flying around. He needs time to heal."

I winced painfully. Velvet Remedy switched topics with what my sleep-deprived mind insisted was a jarring abruptness.

"Littlepip, I had the most interesting conversation while you and Calamity were out stealing."

I sighed weakly. I wasn't really up for this.

"See the buck over there?" she asked, pointing a hoof towards a dark shape that I assumed was a sleeping pony. "His name is Preacher."

I nodded, vaguely recalling Gawd saying something about a Preacher.

"He says he came here to spread the word of the Goddess out from under the hoof of Red Eye."

My ears perked. Velvet Remedy had my full attention. "The word of the Goddess?" I asked. The way she spoke made it clear that she wasn't talking about Celestia or Luna.

Velvet Remedy nodded. "He claims this Goddess of his has been speaking to him in dreams since he was a tiny colt." Her tone suggested her prognosis didn't involve the divine.

I wasn't ready to dismiss it so quickly. Looking sternly to Velvet Remedy, I whispered back, "He might be right." Her eyes widened in disbelief. Before she could open her muzzle to mock, I elaborated. "Ever wonder how the slavers got ahead of our train like that? I've been wondering if there might be some sort of… telepathic magic?… involved somehow."

I felt a sudden urge to travel to Tenpony Tower and talk with DJ Pon3. He seemed to have an incredibly good, if imperfect, network of informants… or possibly some sort of magic or technology that was giving him the lay of the land. I wanted to trade information. Find out what he knew. There was a puzzle here, and I was still several pieces short of seeing the picture. If any pony had those pieces, it would be DJ Pon3.

Velvet Remedy seemed to be digesting my comment. Finally, she spoke again, "Well, if that's true, it puts the rest of what Preacher said in a more ominous light." She lead me to the far corner of the cattle car, whispering, "According to Preacher, the Goddess chooses to speak to very few ponies…"

I found myself questioning that. Chooses? Or are there limitations to this so-called Goddess's powers.

"…And the pony Red Eye is the one she speaks to the most. However, Preacher isn't so sure Red Eye is…" Velvet Remedy paused, searching for words. "…getting the message right. He seems to think that Red Eye's reception is being garbled." Clearly, Velvet Remedy was not satisfied with the analogy, but I got the idea.

"Either that," Velvet continued, "Or he's just not listening. Either way, Preacher is here to spread the 'True Word' of the Goddess. Away from Red Eye and his bands of slavers."

I thought of the armed camp parked a few hours trot outside of Shattered Hoof territory. Preacher didn't go far enough.

I hesitated to ask, "And what is the 'True Word'?" I really didn't want to ask Preacher directly. Sure, I'd get an answer that wasn't tainted by Velvet Remedy's own prejudices, but at the cost of being roped into sermon. I was too tired to even contemplate that tonight.

"To paraphrase: Praise Me, worship Me and I will lift you up and you will all become One, Unified under Me." Velvet Remedy had clearly suffered through hours of this. I could understand why Gawd had been wary of gaining another Preacher.

I nodded to Velvet. "There's a pile of hay calling my name. We're going to talk to Gawd again at breakfast tomorrow, but after that, we're free to go." I wasn't so sure, however, that I wanted to leave just yet.

I played the last audio log before I headed to bed. This time, the banging on the bathroom door was much louder, rhythmic. It sounded like the ponies outside were using a piece of furniture as a battering ram. I could hear structural cracking from the doorframe.

The mare's voice was weak, and she spoke in a disturbing sing-song.

> *"I hear you knockin' but you can't come in!*
>
> *"I hear you… yeah, I hear you. wow… I just realized I've got all these diaries and the only ponies that will every hear them are you fuckers. Fuck you all! Every last one of you!*
>
> *"My…*
>
> *"Oh wow… dizzy… What was I…?*
>
> *"Y'know, I kind of think red is my color… Splish splash, clop clop! Hey, Silver Spoon… let's paint the town red! Or… you know… at least the bathroom…*
>
> *"Oh keep knocking you bastards!*
>
> *"…doesn't go with my cutie mark though. That's okay, it's a stupid cutie mark anyway. Really, a crown of diamonds? What the fuck's that supposed to mean?*
>
> *"I mean, I get the diamonds. Celestia knows I've inspected enough of 'em… Sent the best ones below for years now. Ha! There's something else you're never gonna get! Ha… ha ha… Just like you're not going to get me!*

"my… my name is Diamond Tiara and you fuckers didn't get me! I got… I got away!

"I mean… really, though… a crown? What was that supposed to mean?

"he heee hee! You can't geeeeet meeeeee!

"You can't…

"…can't…

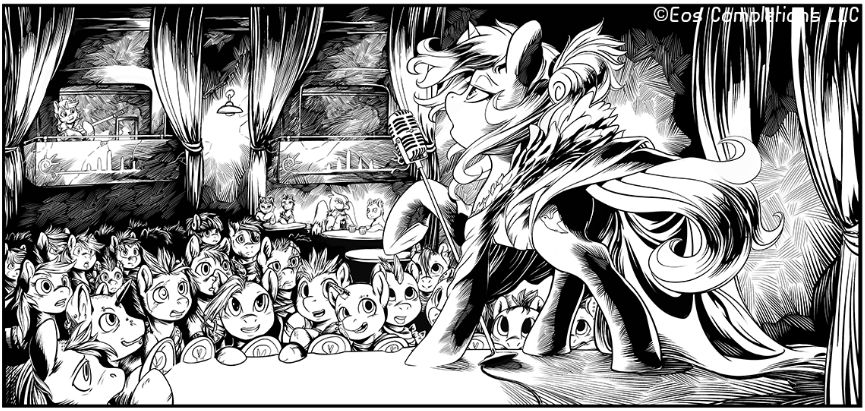
"…get…"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Silent Gallop – You have mastered silent movement, allowing you to move quickly and still remain quiet. You can Sneak at full speed with no penalties.

Chapter Twelve

Must Go On



"So… you think you have what it takes to beat me, on my stage, in my town? Come on down, we'll see."

Breakfast.

I hoofed a small pile of bottle caps across the sheet metal counter while a scarred pony with a dark tan coat and a roasting meat cutie mark pulled a rabbit shish kebob from the barbecue grill. Guests or not, we were expected to pay for our food; I'm not sure why I had expected otherwise. I picked up my meal, the savory aroma assaulting my nostrils, and carried it over to the table where Calamity was already digging into a bowl of oatmeal.

"Littlepip, what are you doing!??" Velvet Remedy nearly shrieked as she saw me approach. I stopped short, looking at her quizzically. Velvet Remedy looked stricken. "You're not going to *eat* that are you?"

I nodded, unable to respond with the shish kebob still in my mouth. My stomach was rumbling. I sucked up a bit of escaping drool and was hit by the flavors of barbecued rabbit. It wasn't quite what I was expecting, and made my stomach do an odd lurch, but it was *good!*

"Littlepip…" Velvet raised her hoof to her chest in exaggerated offense. "That's *meat!"*

"uhf-huf," I mouthed through my breakfast, hoping in vain that having established this fact, I would be allowed to eat in peace.

Velvet Remedy's eyes narrowed. "We're vegetarians," she said flatly.

I paused at that. True, all I had ever eaten in Stable Two was apples. But I had assumed that was because it was the only thing we had for eating. And I felt I would be perfectly happy never eating another apple as long as I lived. I thought back to my first meals outside… how I had found cooked meat stored in a refrigerator, and simply assumed that's what ponies ate in the wasteland. My stomach had fought it uncomfortably, but I figured that was more the result of a lifetime of apples, and that outside food would just take some getting used to. For the most part, I felt I'd acclimated well.

Of course, now that I thought about it, it had been a *raider* refrigerator. So diet was suspect.

Calamity finally pulled his head out of his oatmeal bowl, winging in on the conversation. "Oh, we c'n eat meat all right. Jus' don't much like to. Ain't really good for our diet." Calamity looked sideways, his oatmeal-covered lips curling into a frown. "Muh brothers used t' challenge me t' hotdog eatin' contests. Which mostly meant them shoving the disgustin' things down muh throat."

Velvet Remedy looked appalled.

"'Course, they were prob'ly disgusting more cuz they were two hundred years old than cuz they were meat."

I felt my appetite slip. Ugh! By Celestia's grace, I hoped that they'd at least been kept frozen that entire time!

Velvet Remedy turned up her nose and trotted away from our table. She was just leaving as Gawd alighted next to us with a plate of roasted rats. She watched Velvet shudder in disgust and quicken her pace. Sucking up a rat by the tail and swallowing it whole, Gawd turned to me and asked, "What's her issue?"

* * *

"I suppose you'll be heading out after breakfast then?" Gawd asked. Between bites of grilled vegetables and rabbit meat, I had told Gawd about Red Eye's forces. She'd taken it in with a grave expression. "Did you want that escort?"

It was a question that had plagued me all night. (Not the escort issue, but leaving now in the first place.) We could leave now, put Shattered Hoof behind us completely. Get out before the impending drama, and leave these ponies to the fates they had created for themselves. It was, I had to admit, not without its appeal. Especially considering that the alternatives almost certainly involved getting shot at, with a high chance of dying.

Was there anyone or anything here worth risking my life, or the lives of my companions?

"I-I've been considering staying," I admitted. "Just for a little longer." Gawd smirked at that.

On the other side of the bottle cap, I didn't have any place else pressing to be. I didn't have a home. The one friendly town I had encountered so far had just kicked me out. I was still as lost and adrift as ever before. I felt like I had in Stable Two when I was without my cutie mark, without a place. Same feeling… only the walls had changed. (Even the ceiling was still grey – just higher.) I was the pony with the PipBuck on her flank – a symbol that didn't mean anything special in Stable Two didn't mean anything at all in the wasteland.

Watcher had told me to search for my virtue. What virtue did I have if I walked away? Okay, sanity perhaps. Was sanity a virtue? Self-preservation?

Truth be told, I didn't really have a larger mission. Personally, I found slavery a vile practice and I wanted to take on Red Eye. (And yes, I'd seen signs that Red Eye was involved in something big; but it was only curiosity and worry that cajoled me to investigate.) I could leave under the auspice that I was moving forward in the goal of stopping Red Eye, if indeed that was going to be my goal. But the small army just over those hills were Red Eye's ponies. And if I really wanted to take the slavers on, why not here?

"Maybe we should talk," Calamity told me pointedly.

Gawd was staring at me thoughtfully, obviously weighing options. Finally, she came to a decision. "If you were interested in staying, I have a contract t' offer you."

I raised my eyebrows. "Oh?"

"How would you feel about taking out Deadeyes for me?"

My ears shot up. Calamity stared in surprised. "Me? Why?"

Gawd grimaced. "Because if you don't, I'll have t' do it myself. And while I'm convinced it's within the wingspan of my contract with Mister Topaz t' do so, the political fallout wouldn't be good. Deadeyes' got a lot of supporters, and I don't relish watching for the spear in my back."

"Ah don't see how hiring us t' take out this feller is gonna make ya any less of a target."

"Might not," Gawd agreed. "But it's worth a try. If," she added, turning her stare towards me, "Yer up for it."

My mind reeled. Was I up to killing Deadeyes? Hell, I'd already been wanting to do that. I'd been contemplating that and more. But to be *hired* to do so? I was already a vigilante, but was I ready to be an *assassin?*

I'd been out of the Stable more than a week, less than two. If I did this now, what will I have become by the end of the month? By my next birthday?

"I-I'll think about that," I answered honestly. Gawd frowned. Of course she would want an answer right away. There wasn't exactly much time. We had less than a day before Red Eye's people marched into Shattered Hoof.

It occurred to me that, considering what I knew of Gawd and the Talons, she'd have more respect for me if I asked: "What would we get out of it? What's the pay?"

I swear the hint of a smile touched Gawd's beak. "Deadeyes has a key. Keeps it hidden in his tail at all times. Key opens a vault under Shattered Hoof, down where the old mines are."

Made sense. Naturally, a place like Shattered Hoof would be built on top of a set of gem mines. They couldn't have always relied on just the rock farms. When the gem mines ran dry, what else was there to do with them but use them as storage. Diamond Tiara's last message had even said something about sending the best gems "below."

"What's in the vault?"

Gawd smirked. "Your payment, whatever that happens to be. Could be gems. Could be weapons. Pre-apocalypse ponies used the gemstones from Shattered Rock to build magical energy weapons. Considering that the armory was filled with them, it's a fair assumption that the vault might have even more."

The idea of storing a mass of magical weapons just beneath a prison seemed more than marginally insane to me. After all, surely they didn't build the things here.

But then, if I killed Deadeyes, it wasn't going to be for the reward anyway.

"You can't do this."

Velvet Remedy stomped and snorted about the cattle car, empty but for the three of us. "Littlepip, it's one thing to kill in self defense. Or to protect others. But this…" She turned on me with a stare that could petrify the Overmare herself. "This. Is. *Murder!"*

Calamity was scowling. "Ah have t' agree with Velvet Remedy on this one, Li'lpip," he said flatly. "Ah understand the Talons, c'n even respect 'em just a bit. But Ah ain't a mercenary. You do this, Ah ain't with ya."

Velvet cut deeper. "You know that song I was writing about staying noble and true? That was about you, Littlepip. And this is you failing that on every level. To even consider this…" She backed away from me, her voice softening with regret, "I am. So. Disappointed in you."

I felt like I was bleeding out, dying. But the more they yelled at me, the more I realized I had already chosen my course. I just had to make them understand why.

"Silver Bell."

Both of them quieted, staring at me. After a long, pregnant pause, Calamity asked, "What's Silver Bell got t' do with any o' this?"

I felt weak, but I clamped down on my resolve. "Silver Bell's mother and father were murdered by raiders. And they made Silver Bell and her sister watch. Do you remember that?"

I could see Velvet Remedy's expression quivver. "Of course we…"

"They made. Them. Watch!" I emphasized each word with a stomp of a hoof. "And they made it slow. Really slow and really painful and really horrible!" I asked again, "Do you remember that?"

My companions were both silent.

"Those raiders came from *here,*" I told them finally, "And they were acting on Deadeyes' orders." Spitting, "I saw it for myself in his ledger."

Calamity spoke first. "Well, now, that changes things."

Velvet Remedy shook a little, but stayed firm. "What does it change?"

"Ain't murder no more," Calamity stated without reservation. "It's justice."

Velvet shook her mane. "Revenge, you mean."

"Nope. Ah mean justice. Pure 'n' simple." Calamity nodded to me. "Ah'm in." He glanced at my horn meaningfully. "How's yer TK?"

"Rest did wonders. I won't be juggling train cars," I admitted, "But I think I can manage barrels. How's your wing?"

Velvet Remedy's eyes jumped between the two of us over and over. With a touch of desperation in her voice, she tried, "Are you planning on finding out which raiders were involved and killing them too? Or are you just going to lay waste to the whole of Shattered Hoof?"

"They're raiders," Calamity said evenly, stretching his wing. "Honestly, Ah been wonderin' just why we're helpin' them out at all. Ah figure, let 'em and the slavers duke it out. Stomp down what's left."

I had another idea. "Actually, not everypony here is bad." I was thinking of the rock-breaker I had talked with while he escorted me out. "I think… I believe this place could be turned around. Maybe become a trading town instead of a raider fortress." Even as the words came out, I knew they were stupidly idealistic. But I pressed on. "I'm thinking: kill Deadeyes. Find Mister Topaz and deal with him – amiably if possible, lethally if not. And leave Gawd in charge."

* * *

Deadeyes had told me to come back for one more job. Feeling the comforting weight of Little Macintosh in my saddlebags, my sniper rifle and assault carbine now returned to my back and side, I suspected this wasn't the job he had in mind. But his invitation was the perfect opportunity.

I'd left Calamity back at the yard, reading through *Zebra Infiltration Tactics,* as I went in alone. He didn't like that one bit, but I had explained that I planned to take the long way, explore some of the wings of Shattered Hoof that I hadn't seen yet. Including how to get down to the mine below. Seeing the yard in daylight for the first time, Calamity had immediately spotted the metal plates of a hydraulic cargo lift, but the controls were damaged beyond repair. If it worked at all, it would only be from within the mine itself. There had to be another way. Somewhere, there was a door that went beneath the prison itself, and I wanted to know where it was.

Now, I suspected I had found it.

I was behind the stage in the mess hall. To one side, the curtains, heavy and stained, concealed this darkened space from the large, catwalked area where the raiders ate whatever passed for their meals. Enough dust had accumulated back here that I could tell no pony ventured behind that curtain. Why would they? The space was full of rotting stage props and the skeletons of hundreds of ponies. Countless bones were stuffed into cabinets, spilled out of metal boxes, and formed piles that must have been three ponies high when they still had flesh.

The "guests" of Shattered Hoof had spiraled into barbarism and cannibalism, and eventually every one of them had perished in here. I'd found logs; I'd found graffiti. I had wondered why I wasn't tripping over their skeletons.

Above, a huge mural spanned the wall. A painting of the same noble-looking soldier pony I had seen a statue of back in Ponyville. Rearing up. Behind him, clear even though the mural was badly faded and chipped, was the Goddess Celestia herself, her divine features beaming with approval. Originally, I realized, this is what every pony who was a "guest" of Shattered Hoof would have seen each time they ate a meal. Until the stage had been built, hiding it away.

There was a barred gate set into the wall, wide enough to pull a wagon through. Beyond, a small kill-zone, only a few yards deep, with two magical energy turrets set into alcoves on each side, powered down. Beyond, a thick metal door. Based on the dead light above, I could tell the door had no power.

I wanted inside. And not because there was a vault filled with possible treasure. Only Deadeyes had a key to the vault, and only Deadeyes had ever seen Mister Topaz face-to-face. If Mister Topaz really existed at all, I was dead certain he was down in that vault. My mind was conjuring up images of everything from a dedicated computer terminal that allowed Deadeyes to speak to a very remote Mister Topaz, to the vault being a

Stable, to Mister-Topaz-the-Brainbot.

The gate was locked. I had to push aside mounds of crumbling bones to get to it, holding my breath as white flakes stirred into the air. It took several minutes of effort, but the gate finally opened to my talents. The metal door, however, was another story entirely. It could only be opened by a terminal elsewhere in the building, and only then if I could restore power to it.

* * *

I must have spent hours poking around Shattered Hoof, seeking to restore power to that door. It was just a simple matter of replacing a mouthful of fuses, and swapping out a row of spark batteries, but those proved annoyingly difficult to find.

I did find the armory through a side room off the guard barracks. It was completely devoid of weapons – no surprise, as most of the raiders seemed to be armed with magical energy weapons that I assumed were looted from the armory. There was, however, a framed news article on the back wall, and behind it, a safe.

As I took the frame off the wall, the photograph caught my eye. The scene was in the midst of a light winter snowfall; picture was of a funeral. From the looks of it, a very important one, as the shadowy figures of two winged unicorns stood in the background, badly out of focus. One was markedly shorter than the other. My mind wanted to turn them into the Goddesses Celestia and Luna.

But that wasn't what had captured my attention. The photographer's eye had focused on a mare – a single orange pony who, unlike all around her, had shunned the formal black dresses worn by others to wear only a black cowgirl hat and a black kerchief about her neck with an image of half an apple embroidered into the front. The camera had caught a splash of light glistening off a falling tear as she dropped a single, beautiful flower onto the casket. The mare's cutie mark, three apples, was identical to the design on Little Macintosh.

> ***All of Equestria Mourns Big Macintosh,***
> ***Hero of Shattered Hoof Ridge***
>
> *Two weeks ago, we didn't even know his name. But when Big Macintosh leapt in front of a zebra assassin's bullet meant for Princess Celestia, dying instantly, he also leapt into the hearts and minds of every loving and patriotic pony, becoming a paragon of courage, bravery and self-sacrifice to all of Equestria.*
>
> *Funeral services were held this afternoon in the western courtyard of Ministry Walk. By decree of Princess Luna, pegasus ponies arranged for a light snow…*

* * *

The safe had opened to reveal two (!) Stealth Bucks, the last spark batteries I needed, and a variety of ammo clips which, according to the documents found with them, were magically enhanced. Bullets for Little Macintosh, the needle gun, even Calamity's battle saddle. Plus two types for weapons of a caliber I was unfamiliar with (although I suspected one type was for the multi-barreled battle saddles I'd seen the slavers use).

I had just saddlebagged my new treasures and was putting the framed article back in place when the sounds of talking raiders froze me.

"…sure they ain't gonna blow themselves all t' hell an' back on the landmines?" One voice, a stallion.

A youthful-sounding mare snorted, "Like I'd care all that much if they did. You have any idea what those damned slavers did t' my town?"

I hastily finished replacing the frame and hugged a wall behind one of the empty sets of ammo shelves, ears alert.

"Ain't y'all from Littlehorn? Heard they massacred that place."

"Naw. But it would have been kinder to. They took all the mares and bucks they could, killed the rest and left them dead and rotting where they fell. But the colts and fillies? Red Eye doesn't have any use for kids. So they just left us behind to fend for ourselves."

After a moment of awkward silence, she continued. "Place went bad real fast. Hell, it was bad to start with, so many of us seeing our parents sliced and splattered. But it got a whole lot worse. Got my tail out of there quick as I could. So personally, I'd be more than happy if a good deal of this raiding party died screaming with their legs blown off."

I could see the shadows of the two Shattered Hoof Raiders move across the floor of the armory as they walked past, too deep in their conversation to notice if anything was amiss.

"Ayep, Ah get that. But if Deadeyes' trap works, we'll have a whole mess o' them slavers as *our* slaves. Then ya c'n take it out on 'em all slow and personal-like. Ah'm sure Deadeyes won't mind if a few o' his new rock-breakers are missin' some non-vital internal organs."

Their voices faded as they turned a corner somewhere out of sight. I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

My mind raced to put together what I'd just heard. Deadeyes wasn't, then, wasn't betraying Shattered Hoof to the slavers after all. He was just tricking Red Eye's forces into thinking he was – luring them into a trap. Of course he wanted them to get *in* without any difficulties.

And he was deceiving Gawd into acting against him. Which, if this plan had the hoof-stamp of approval from Mister Topaz… or worse, was actually Mister Topaz's plan…

I needed to speak to Gawd. Before I went shooting anypony.

* * *

"I want you to kill Gawd."

I stared at Deadeyes. *This* was the second task he had for me?

Feigning ignorance as best I could yet again, "Who?"

Deadeyes snorted. "Gawdyna Grimfeathers. Griffin. Scar running up her beak and across her face. Only one eye. Can't miss her." He leaned forward with a sadistic smile. "You do this, you're in. Part of my crew." Seeming pleased with himself, he sweetened the deal, "Hell, I'll even make you one of my personal guards. You'll get a nice room and some of the better food."

I was at a loss for words. He was playing me. I knew it. But I was still totally thrown.

I looked around like a drowning pony looking for a helping hoof. And once again, my eyes fell on the picture of Stable Two's first Overmare, Sweetie Belle. I remembered something that Velvet Remedy had told me. Something the Overmare had told her.

Looking straight back into Deadeyes' slate grey eyes, I nodded firmly. "Okay. Not a problem."

He blinked.

"Is that all?" I asked, as if killing Gawd was the easiest thing in Equestria.

He raised his eyebrows. "No… I think that will do."

I turned as if to leave, took a few steps, and stopped. Looking over my shoulder, "It's not like ponies here won't suspect you. You should have an alibi."

His eyebrows raised further.

"Tell you what. I've got a plan that will take care of your griffin problem and leave you looking clean."

His eyes narrowed now. "Oh do you? Please, do tell."

"Ever heard of a pony named Sweetie Belle?"

Deadeyes blinked in surprise and then laughed. He pointed at the picture on the wall. "Heard of her? I have every song of hers you can find in the wasteland. Do you realize she actually performed here? Right down on that stage." He pointed his hoof in the direction of the mess hall. "Take the stairs just outside my office, and they'll take you to the balcony where the Friendship Warden watched the performance."

Wow. I had hoped Deadeyes was at least familiar with the mare he had on his wall, but I never imagined the sadistic bastard was a *fan.*

He stopped gushing, his voice turning colder. "Why?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, by now you know I didn't travel here alone. One of the people traveling with me just so happens to be a direct descendant of Sweetie Belle. And as it turns out, musical talent runs in the family."

I had his attention. "Her name is Velvet, and she's on her way to Manehattan to record some new music for DJ Pon3's radio station." Wait… that's actually a pretty good idea! And it would give me a way to talk with the wasteland's most famous buck.

"What I'm thinking: I think I can talk her into putting on a performance here. Using that very stage…" My mind was racing, trying to put together a decent-sounding plan as quickly as I spoke. "We'll do it tonight. Invite everypony in to see it. And… Gawdyna Grimfeathers too."

Deadeyes, I could see, was liking this idea. And with the battle coming tomorrow morning, he had to be figuring the timing for a morale-boosting celebration was perfect.

"I'll be hiding up in the balcony. I'll take two shots. One through the head of the griffin. The other into your table, close enough to look like you were also a target." I levitated out one of the Stealth Bucks. "I'll be gone before any pony can catch me or even see who it was. You can blame it on a slaver assassin. Who wouldn't buy that?"

Especially if everypony knew the slavers were due to attack in mass the next morning.

Deadeye contemplated the plan while I stood there, feeling increasingly nervous. He had to realize this plan put him in the same crosshairs as Gawd, and he already thought of me as her spy. Would he believe I would betray her so quickly, that my loyalty was up for grabs?

"I like it!" Deadeyes broke into a grin. He clopped his hooves together. "Just one stipulation."

Uh oh.

"This Velvet of yours… I want to hear at least two songs before you go interrupting the show. Including something by Sweetie Belle."

"um… any particular one?"

He smiled. "Hell, I love 'em all." He leaned back. "Surprise me."

As I walked out of Deadeyes' office, I took another look around. I remembered how Deadeyes and his guards had gone off a different way just before I stole the ledger. Now, I was unsurprised to find the passage led to stairs that wrapped around to the balcony above. I looked it over. Shadowed. Occluded. It was a perfect sniping position.

On my way back down the steps, I noticed a sickly apple-colored glow which I hadn't seen before. One of the terminals in one of the desks in the room outside of Deadeyes office was powered up. I was sure it hadn't been before. Replacing those fuses and spark batteries must have powered it up. Pulling out my access tool, I hacked into the terminal.

There were no menus, no entries. Instead, just a single function. I had found the terminal that opened door to the mines and vault below.

* * *

"I'll put a bullet through Deadeye's head," I told Gawd. "And another into your table. Then use a Stealth Buck to slip out before anypony can identify me. You can blame it on the slavers who are attacking tomorrow." Gawd was pondering the idea skeptically. "Sure, some ponies might still have suspicions, but not the kind they could act on. Particularly if you take over and lead them to victory against the slavers."

Gawd shook her head. "I've got t' hand it to you. Yer one hell of a devious plotter." I felt a rush of pride, and then immediately questioned if enjoying such praise spoke good or ill of me.

A few minutes later, I joined Calamity and Velvet Remedy in the cattle car. Velvet Remedy was prancing around nervously. "A show? With only hours to prepare?"

"An' why are we doin' this again?" Calamity was confused. "Whose side are we on now?"

"Same as before. Basic plan shouldn't change. But first, I want to get those two in the same room together."

Velvet Remedy opened one of her saddleboxes, pulling out a notebook. "What songs will I do? Most of my music isn't really raider-appropriate. Somehow, I don't think songs about peace and love, nobility or freedom are really their fare."

Calamity whinnied, "Well most o' the lot are escaped slaves…"

Velvet Remedy was checking down her list of songs. "Well, that one's out. That one… might work. Oh, that could be fun, but it was originally meant as a duet. (I read in an old magazine that Pinkie Pie and Vinyl Scratch once performed it at Hoofbeats.) I could tweak it for one pony, but it really requires musical accompaniment. Maybe a Velvet Remedy original? How about…?"

I blinked, remembering, "Well, Deadeye's expecting two songs before the attack. And he says one of them has to be a song by Sweetie Belle."

Velvet huffed. "And you were going to tell me this when?"

"um… just now?"

She nickered. "Great. Two songs, one by my great, great, et cetera grandmother. Well, at least I know most of those by heart. But the other…"

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. As much as I adored Velvet Remedy's music, and fell in love with her in every song, tonight we were just looking for a distraction. It didn't have to be perfect.

"Ya think y'all will be able t' keep every set of eyes on you?" Calamity asked.

Velvet Remedy looked playfully insulted. "Why of course, dear. There won't be an eye for anypony else in that room." I believed it. I believed Velvet Remedy could keep every eye on her even if Ditzy Doo was in the audience. Suddenly, Velvet Remedy gasped. "Every eye! I'll need a bath! Oh no, what am I going to wear!?"

"I can help with that."

Velvet cocked her head. "No thank you. I can bathe myself quite well enough, dear."

I stammered, flushing hotly. That wasn't what I meant, but now that she had said it, I couldn't drive the image out of my mind. My heart fluttered in my chest.

Calamity neighed and turned away. "I'll give you two some private time for…" he waved a hoof between us, "…whatever this is." He made a quick exit, muttering something about helping Gawd's ponies get their magical plasma cannon up and running before Red Eye's forces got here. I wasn't paying any attention. I only had eyes for Velvet Remedy, and I could feel my face burning.

"I…" I stomped. "I meant, I have the perfect thing for you to wear!" Focusing my magic, I opened my saddlebags and slid out the most beautiful dress in the wasteland, my find from Carousel Boutique.

* * *

"How can I fix this? How many times must I try?
Please, this time, let me get it right…
Get it ri-i-ight!"

Velvet Remedy was gorgeous. The dress was perfect on her, making her more stunning than I had ever seen her before. Her horn was aglow, and the stage was awash with warm, colored light that shifted with her voice and the mood of the song.

"I rear up on my hooves, throw a buck in the air,
And let firm resolve overwhelm my despair!.."

She'd chosen as her first number that same incredibly heart-breaking song from the radio. Something every pony would be familiar with. And she was more than doing it justice. She was… magnificent.

I crouched on the balcony, covered in the ever-disgusting mattress cover. S.A.T.S. was ready. My sniper rifle was loaded and tucked at my side. I actually hated myself for planning to ruin her performance.

Deadeyes hadn't been stupid. When I entered the balcony, I found a note had been left for me: *One shot to the target, one to the table. The stage is rigged to explode if you shoot anything else.*

Celestia burn him! Even if I could get a message to Calamity, he was no better at disarming explosives than I was. (Out of petty spite, I stole his copy of *Applied Gemstones.*)

Velvet Remedy drew the song to a tear-jerking close. The audience, scores of raider ponies, sat utterly stunned. Even Gawd's beak had dropped open. There were several seconds of dense quiet, the stage going dark save for the faintest glow from Remedy's horn. Then an explosion of hoofbeats shook the mess hall, vibrating the balcony and sending bits of debris down from the roof as dozens of ponies hoof-stomped in applause.

I caught Deadeyes shooting a glance up at the balcony. Out of the corner of her eye, Gawd caught it too. She dipped her beak into a tin drinking cup, her gaze never leaving him.

New music began to swell from the stage, an orchestra in a single horn.

Velvet Remedy began clopping a hoof on the stage, setting a rhythm. Soon, most of the ponies in the hall were matching her stomp.

"Enough of this slow stuff, who's here to party!?" she bellowed out, drawing a roar from the crowd.

My ears were up; my eyes widened. And for a moment, I completely forgot about the sniper rifle at my side. All that mattered was that I didn't recognize this music. I'd never heard this song!

"Gallop, don't trot, night's burning hot, don't make me wait to go!
Band's playing loud, screams of the crowd,
this here's what feeds my soul!
If you're not smiling, you're not trying!
Start a riot! Don't be quiet!
Hoof to the floor, just give me more, I need my rock 'n' roll!"

By Celestia's grace! She's going to set off any explosives under that stage herself!

I floated up my sniper rifle, now terrified of letting her complete the song. With the light and sound now bursting from the stage, Velvet Remedy absolutely had every pony's (and griffin's) attention. By Luna, I could probably start shooting and no pony would notice until half the room was down! Well, if the stage didn't go up in a fireball.

"…Don't be lazy; just go crazy!
Why don'tcha get that it's a PARTY?"

Flowing into the perfection of my PipBuck's targeting spell, I locked onto a sequence of three targets.

BLAM!! BLAM!!

First shot tore through the tin cup, splashing Gawd with her drink, and dug into the table. Before anypony could react, the second ripped the top half of Deadeyes' head clean off, splattering several of the ponies in front of him. My third target was Velvet Remedy, who glowed with a light not of her own making as I telekinetically shoved her back through the heavy curtains and off the stage.

True to Deadeye's word, the entire front of the stage detonated in a roar of fire and splinters not a breath later. Waves of ponies in the front row fell. I saw Gawd stagger, bleeding from wooden shrapnel.

I activated the Stealth Buck and galloped silently towards the stairs. From below, I could hear somepony yelling, "It's the slavers! They're attacking early!"

Completely fair assumption, I thought as I hit the stairs. I was halfway down when an explosion from somewhere outside let me know the panicking pony hadn't been completely wrong.

As I raced for the terminal, my mind boggled at the coincidence. But no, I realized as I got to the desk and activated the terminal's single function, it wasn't coincidence at all. Red Eye's slavers weren't going to trust Deadeyes. Just as Deadeyes planned to betray them, they must have always intended to attack early. And right now, *every single pony was in here.* In accordance with the plan, even Gawd was in attendance, as were her loyalists. We'd pulled all the ponies into one place and left the outskirts and guardposts undefended. Of course they would attack *now.*

⁂

The Stealth Buck was just wearing off as I dashed into the room behind the curtains. I found Velvet Remedy pulling herself out of a pile of skeletons. Her perfect dress had bones hanging from it.

Panting, I apologized, explaining about the note. She waved it off. "Oh that's quite all right. I'd much rather be buried in a pile of skeletons than actually join them." With a smile that melted my heart, "Thank you, Littlepip!"

Then, as an afterthought, "Couldn't let me finish the song, though?"

Sheepishly, "I was afraid you'd set off the explosives yourself." I looked back towards the curtains. From the flickering light around their edges, the front side of the curtains was on fire. They were thick enough that the flames hadn't chewed their way through yet. I looked up. Black smoke was beginning to coat the ceiling. On the other side of the curtains, I heard gunfire and magical energy blasts being exchanged. I looked around for Calamity.

The rust-colored pegasus galloped in a moment later, his black cowpony hat nearly falling off. A key dangled from a chain between his teeth.

Velvet Remedy rolled her eyes with a laugh. "You actually stopped to get the key?"

Calamity turned his head, hooking the chain to one of the guns on his battle saddle. "Hells ya!" He grinned to Velvet. "Dependin' on who wins out there, Ah'm already makin' plans t' swoop back in an' loot the bodies."

Velvet Remedy turned up her nose. Even I rolled my eyes. Then I turned and trotted for the gate. "Come on…"

Calamity bit the tip of my tail, stopping me. "Whoa there, dumpling." He nodded his head towards the gate. I turned to look.

On the other side of the gate, between us and the now open metal door, were four turrets pointing right at me.

I groaned. Turning back on the power turned on the turrets too. How could I have been so stupid as to not realize that would happen. I could have disabled them before, when it was safe.

"We take all four out at once?" Calamity asked.

"No… hold on… let me think."

"Why are we still going down there anyway?" Velvet asked, clearly assuming the rest of the plan was a bust.

I was tempted to agree. Now, more than anything, "I'm kinda hoping there's a back way out."

I lifted my PipBuck and looked at it. "Okay, we're in luck. I've got one more Stealth

Buck. I can use it to get up to the turrets and reprogram them, just like the ones back at that pegasus convoy. That way, they'll let us through, and keep anypony who gets the idea to follow us out."

We had a plan. I pulled the dead Stealth Buck out of my PipBuck and slotted in my last one. Then I got to work.

* * *

We found ourselves creeping through caves converted to storage, piled with crates emblazoned with the name Shattered Hoof Re-Educational Stockyard. A few were marked with a circle proclaiming them Celestial Tier Priority and branded with either the initials M.A.S. or M.W.T.

"Well," I whispered conversationally to my companions. "I know M.A.S. is the Ministry of Magic, but I haven't heard of the other one."

Calamity stopped, an expression of confusion clouding his face. "How does…?"

"Ministry of Arcane Sciences," Velvet Remedy explained casually before he hurt something.

A voice, low and deep, rumbled through the caves, bringing us all to a halt.

"So! You're the little ponies who have come to my town and made such a mess of things. You've killed my lieutenant, and now you've come for me."

"Mister Topaz?" Calamity asked, echoing my own thoughts. Either he was using an impressively well-hidden speaker system, or he was using magic to augment his voice. I suspected the latter. And that probably meant a unicorn. Or… a worse idea struck me… one of those pseudo-goddess things like the creature from old Appleloosa.

And here I was, all out of boxcars.

I quickly passed out the magical ammo, giving a prayer to Celestia and another to Luna. If Mister Topaz was one of those monsters, we'd need all the divine assistance we could get.

Calamity quickly changed the load on his battle saddle. Velvet Remedy, however, looked unimpressed. Her horn began to glow, and when she opened her mouth, her voice cried out from every rock and timber in the mines:

"NOT. IMPRESSED."

Her nicker rang off the walls. Velvet Remedy turned down the awesome until her voice was only a little more terrifying than his. ***"Now why don't you be polite? Stop playing games, and come out to say hello."***

I floated up Little Macintosh and prepared for the appearance of what I had now convinced myself was one of those pseudo-goddesses.

As the orange-scaled dragon loomed around the corner, licking his teeth, I realized I was so very wrong.

* * *

"Well," Calamity shouted as his wings propelled him down the caverns faster than Velvet Remedy or I could gallop. "At least he's not a *full grown* dragon!"

I poured on the speed, somehow managing to keep up with Velvet Remedy. Calamity was right, for what good that did us – Mister Topaz was slightly smaller than a train car, not counting his sharply-spiked tail. He could swallow me in one bite; but for Calamity, he might require two. I didn't see how that benefited him much.

Using my magic, I ripped another support beam out of the wall as we raced past. I could hear rocks crashing down as the ceiling caved in. I wasn't stopping him, but at least I was slowing him down enough to stay ahead of those teeth!

"We could have tried diplomacy," Velvet cried out as she ran for her life. "If Calamity hadn't shot him first!"

My breath was becoming labored, and stitches of fire were growing through my lungs. I could hear Mister Topaz tearing through the newest collapse. "Left ahead!" I gasped. I was unable to stop and check my PipBuck's automap, but my Eyes-Forward Sparkle compass indicated we were circling around.

"At least we know the new ammo works!" Calamity spun in place, firing off twin shots at the dragon, then took a hard left, disappearing around the corner. We followed, not far behind. The hall we had just left turned into an inferno, the walls shaking from the dragon's roar.

The ammo was working. The shots punched right through the dragon's armored hide. But he was so big that they mostly just seemed to make him mad.

Without slowing, Velvet laughed as we ran past a large metal door. "Well, there's your vault! Anypony want to stop and open it?"

Smart-assed rhetorical question.

Calamity stopped at the next junction, hovering in a nicely controlled panic. "Littlepip, which way?"

"Should be right this time!" At least, I really hoped so. If not, I was sending us into a dead end. With extra stress on dead.

Calamity disappeared down the right passage.

Luna and Celestia were with us. The choice had been right, and the passageway led us back into the first tunnel. Recognizing it, Calamity had already flown back into Shattered Hoof, where the battle between the raiders and slavers was fully engaged.

Velvet Remedy was next out. But as I raced for the door, Mister Topaz finally caught up. He opened his huge maw, teeth glistening. A drop of saliva fell onto my neck.

The turrets opened fire as I raced through them.

The dragon screamed! The sound rocked the mess hall, and brought a temporary halt to the fighting as every pony turned to stare at the now quite wounded and extremely pissed-off dragon as Mister Topaz blasted all four turrets with fire. Internal components melted with a static hiss and they stopped. I felt the fire wash over me, my coat blackening, my skin blistering under the heat. One of my saddle bags caught fire.

My heart was pounding like it was going to explode. My sides burned from exertion. I tried to yell out to the others, but I couldn't get the breath. I wasn't going to make it outside before I collapsed.

I veered away from the others as the fire began spreading from the saddlebag to the harness that held my sniper rifle; I was running for a hallway too narrow for the dragon. Behind me, the mess hall was washed in flames. Mister Topaz was burning to death slaver and raider ponies alike.

And then the dragon was gone.

* * *

I collapsed against the wall of a washroom two corridors away from the mess hall, panting hard. Water filled the sink next to me, soaking my saddlebag and pouring onto the floor next to me. It felt cool against my burn-tortured skin. I flopped over and wallowed in the forming puddle, wishing I could dip every part of me that hurt into it. I was crying.

I tried not to think of how much it hurt. To focus elsewhere. It wasn't easy.

The dragon, I assumed, had headed back into the mines. He could fly around the mess hall all he wanted, but the rest of the halls were too narrow for him. He was probably born down there or…

Velvet Remedy collapsed next to me, breathing heavily. It was nothing short of miraculous that neither of us were more gravely injured, much less dead. I tried to get up, but now that I'd stopped, my legs were refusing to work again.

"Where's… the… dragon?" I panted, searching for confirmation of my theory. Velvet Remedy just shook her head. She didn't know.

"Where's… Calamity?"

"I don't… know… Lost… track."

Dammit. Calamity wasn't foolish enough to go back down there after him, or the vault, was he? No, of coruse not. He just got separated, that's all. But if the slavers and raiders were still going at each other in the yard, it wasn't safe to stand around at the rendezvous point. Would he fly back to Junction R-7 and wait for us there? Or engage the ponies fighting in…

"Oh blessed Luna!"

"Littlepip?" Velvet Remedy, as exhausted as she was, held her ears alert.

I had realized that the giant hole torn in the razor wire over the yard must have been the work of the dragon. And that led me to: "The cargo elevator! The dragon's going to come up through the rock yard!"

I hissed in pain as I tried to move. Velvet Remedy looked to me with alarm. "Little… pip! Here… let me…" She weakly opened one of the yellow medical boxes she used as saddle bags and pulled out the very last of our healing bandages as well as a syringe. "This… will… dull the pain…" She panted slowly. "Trust me… you'll need it."

She was very right. The painkiller helped. I screamed anyway.

When Velvet Remedy had finished, I felt lightheaded and my vision was blurred with tears. I moaned weakly, my knees trembling, as I finally got to my hooves.

"Littlepip, you're in no condition…" But there was no conviction in Velvet Remedy's voice, just sorrow. She knew as well as I that we couldn't stay here. And she knew I had to try to help Calamity.

"Do we… have any Buck in our supplies?" I bit my lower lip, hating to ask her for such a thing.

Velvet Remedy spared me her usual gasp of disapproval, simply bringing out the bottle and passing me a few of the yellowish-orange pills inside.

"Thanks," I whispered, floating them into my mouth. I stuck my head under the waterfall spilling out of the faucet and swallowed them without chewing.

It took a few moments, long enough that I feared it wasn't going to have the effect I needed.

A burst of energy flooded through me. I felt stronger, faster, less exhausted and more awake. This… this was good. This would definitely do!

I lifted my soaked saddlebag out of the sink and back onto my flanks, hissing as they rubbed against my bandaged skin. "On second thought," I thought, lifting it off and letting it float beside me.

Turning to Velvet Remedy, I made an effort to keep from sounding bossy. "Velvet, would you please try to find Calamity? Just be careful. Don't get caught… by anypony."

She nodded. "What are you going to try to do, Littlepip?"

I glanced towards the door. "I'm going back down. I'm going to get to that vault. If we're lucky, there will be something inside that will give us a chance against that dragon."

"But…" Velvet Remedy frowned, "Littlepip, you don't have the key!"

With a smile, "When have I ever needed a key to get past a lock?"

* * *

The mess hall was a slaughterhouse. The charred frame of the stage was still licked with flame. The air was choked with smoke. The smell of roasted ponies, some of them still on fire, tried to strangle me.

I was in a hurry, but I still took the time to snag a few of the random, less-damaged weapons from the floor before I made my way past the heat-twisted gate and slagged turrets. Behind me, the flame-broiled crossbeam that once held the stage curtains came crashing down. I made my way towards the vault.

Turning a corner, I found myself face to face with a pony in leather armor wielding a magical energy lance. I couldn't tell which side she had been on, but it didn't matter; she immediately dropped into a combative stance.

"Wait…"

She thrust the glowing tip of the lance at me. I tried to dodge, my side slamming into the cave wall. A line of stinging agony swept across the side of my neck, my flesh bubbling and melting. *"AAaaaugh!"*

The pony backed up, swinging the tip of the magic lance towards my head. I dropped to my belly, the lance passing over me, and flung my saddlebags into her face. The pony stumbled back.

As she recovered, I kicked into S.A.T.S. and aimed one of the random weapons at her. My heart sank as I realized it was a magical energy rifle and I had no idea how to fire it. The pony thrust the lance towards my eyes and I swung the rifle into its path, deflecting it. The rifle hissed and warped where the lance's tip connected.

I dropped everything I was floating and charged the pony, head down. She swung the lance again, but I was inside its reach; the shaft slapped against my side with enough force to bruise through my armored utility barding, but not enough to knock me off course. My horn punched through her armor and buried itself deep into her chest.

I felt the lance bounce off my head as it dropped from her mouth. She tried to pull back, but I pushed forward until I felt her weaken, her body becoming dead weight.

I stepped back, my horn coated in blood. The pony fell at my feet, still breathing shallowly.

I felt the blood trickle down my head. A drop fell into my left eye, tinting my sight with scarlet.

Weakly, she whimpered. "…I don't want to die…"

I cringed. I tried to blink the blood out of my eye, but instead more drops fell in, blurring my vision. "It's too late. I'm sorry." I was, honestly. "I can't save you."

I contemplated breaking her neck. She was already dead – why make her suffer? I raised my hoof…

…And stepped over her. I just couldn't do that. No matter what I was allowing the wasteland to make me, I hadn't changed that much yet.

I walked down the shaft a few more feet, then stopped and turned. I floated my saddlebags to me, opening them and drawing out my blanket. I gently laid it across her. Then I floated the weapons up from the ground, leaving the magical energy rifle, but adding her lance to my collection.

I didn't have any further trouble before reaching the vault.

* * *

The tumblers fell into place and the metal door to the vault unlocked with a click. And then all the alarms went off.

Apparently, while I didn't need a key to open this door, I did need it to do so quietly.

I planted my forehooves on the heavy metal door and, straining, pushed it open. (Something I almost certainly couldn't have done if I wasn't hyped on Buck.) I stepped into the darkness beyond and focused, increasing the light of my horn to illuminate the room.

There were many things I had been expecting. This wasn't any of them.

The room was filled, top to bottom, with shelves of memory orbs. Each orb was tagged with a date and a "guest number". There must have been hundreds of them.

My ears and tail drooped. There was nothing in here that would help against…

"Well, well. Aren't you insistent."

I spun around. Mister Topaz was crouched at the door of the vault, the dragon's head sticking in. He was too broad at the shoulders to fit, but he completely blocked my only exit. And one breath of fire would incinerate everything in the vault.

"I was on my way up to chomp a few of your friends outside, particularly that delicious-looking pegasus, when you just had to ring the dinner bell."

I was able to back just out of chomping range before my tail hit the back shelf, sending memory orbs falling to the floor. I looked around frantically, but there was no place to hide or flee.

"You just had to get yourself eaten first. I admire that perseverance," the dragon joked wickedly.

"F-first?" Mister Topaz was sadistic, but at least he was talkative. If I could keep him speaking, maybe I could figure a way out. I tried racking my brain for some telekinetic trick that could save my hide.

"The gemstones are dessert, of course. You ponies, you're the main course." The dragon scowled, making me want to scream. **"Of course, you went and mucked everything up. I spend all this time and effort ensuring a harvest perfect for a final pre-**

sleep meal, and now most of them are dead!"

His glare was filled with hatred. "**You little ponies taste so much better alive.**"

I backpedaled, pressing myself into the shelf, knocking down dozens of the little mystical orbs which scattered across the floor, rolling in all directions.

The dragon's gaze was drawn momentarily to one of the rolling balls. "**What exactly were you expecting to find in here anyway? Mountains of gems? Because you thought I'd enjoy needing to call down that imbecile Deadeyes every time I got a bit peckish? Did you even look in the crates?**"

"N-no."

He laughed, the breath of his merriment heating the room until I felt I would faint. I lost all focus, my saddlebags and collected weapons clattering to the ground. He glanced at them with amusement.

"Or was it weapons? Did you hope to find a magical shotgun of dragon slaying, perhaps? Because there would ever be any dragon suicidal enough to keep something like that around the house."

"n-n-no," I said again, although this time he had been fairly on the nose.

The dragon reached into the room and flicked one of the orbs at me with a claw. "**Go ahead. Try one. You died for this, after all.**"

I was going to die.

Hesitantly, I reached a hoof towards one of the orbs, but then drew it back. I was sweating profusely. The heat in the room was draining my strength. Soon I wouldn't be able to stand. And still, the only strategy I had was to keep him talking.

"w-what are they?"

"**Confessions.**" The dragon smiled cruelly. "**Seems the old mare of your Ministry of Morale didn't exactly trust normal methods of interrogation. Some incident in her youth or something. So instead, they trained up unicorns like yourself to sift through other ponies' memories, find the condemning thoughts or experiences, and rip them out for public record. Didn't want any innocent ponies getting sent to Shattered Hoof, after all.**"

"wha… but… that's…"

"**Of course, not every pony came out of the process in the same condition they went in, mentally speaking. But what is it you ponies say? Can't bake a pie without dicing some apples?**" He laughed again. This time, I did lose consciousness. Only for a moment, I think. But I found myself laying on the floor with no memory of falling.

"that's… awful."

The dragon stopped laughing. "**You see, little pony? Look at what you ponies are doing to each other up there. Look at what you did to each other in here. What makes you think your pathetic, wicked species is worth being anything other than dragon food?**"

I tried to get up. I just couldn't. The heat was making all my burns blaze in agony. I felt like I was on fire again, only this time it was worse. I cried out.

The dragon was going to eat me. There were no options, no tricks, no other ways out. I was going to die here. Like this. Alone in a tiny metal room underneath a prison.

But still, I tried to answer. "N-not all… of us… are bad. Some… of us… are good."

The dragon snorted, adding smoke to the heat. "**Yeah, I can see that.**" He was staring at me, and it took a moment for me to realize he was staring at my horn. The heat had caked the blood.

Mockingly, he offered, "**Well, I suppose some of you are good… with ketchup. Makes you little ponies nice and slippery going down!**" I cringed, fearing he would laugh again. The air was almost too hot to breathe. "**Although personally, I prefer mustard…**"

The mine shaft outside erupted in green liquid fire, the blast catching the dragon in the side with enough force to yank his head out of the room, sending him sprawling.

"Yee HAW!"

Blessed cool air swam into the room, clearing my head. That was Calamity's voice!

"How'd ya like them *apples!"* Calamity flapped into view, carrying the magical plasma cannon from Junction R-7.

"Hey Li'lpip! Boy am Ah glad t' see yer okay! Sorry it took me so long t' get back. These things are heavy when not properly mounted!" The monstrous, tri-barreled weapon was bigger than he was, strapped to his underbelly with it's power array attached to the top of his battle saddle with rope.

I found myself giggling half-hysterically. "Y-you look ridiculous!"

"Yeah, well…" Calamity's jovial voice cut off. "Oh you have *got* to be kiddin' me!"

"What?"

"He's gettin' back up! Run!"

Run was a bit more than I could manage. A third of my body felt like it was being held to a flame. I staggered, trying to focus. My saddlebag started to lift.

Calamity fired again, the blast from the cannon obliterating the air, the kick sending the pegasus pony hurling backwards. The dragon roared in pain and rage.

Glorious Luna, what does it take to kill one of these things!?

Telekinetically grabbing the rest my possessions, I dashed out the door. Calamity was biting off the ropes holding the cannon. "Can't carry you an' this at the same time."

I looked back. The dragon was badly wounded, possibly mortally. One of his wings was warped and deformed. The scales on his side had melted back against his ribs. One of his legs was a deformed stump. And still, he was getting back up, his eyes, filled with rage. He opened his mouth to bellow fire.

The fire was only a fraction of the blasts he had managed before. I felt the wave of superheated air that rode in front of it, but the flames didn't reach us.

Moments later, Calamity was pulling me through the air. Up out of the hole left by the lowered hydraulic cargo lift and into the cloudy sky. We shot past Gawd, engaged in a brutal aerial combat with the two griffins from the slaver camp; out of the corner of my non-blooded eye, I saw her draw that magical energy shotgun and empty it point-blank into the breast of one of her opponents. Beneath us, the chaos of warring ponies filled the rock yard, explosions and bursts of magical energy forming a violent dance of carnage around the dark, hollow square of the lift.

The dragon, impossibly, followed.

Even with its ruined wing, the dragon was faster than we were, tearing through the hole in the razor-mesh in pursuit of us. Calamity would have been more maneuverable had his wing been fully healed and he wasn't carrying the extra weight. As it was, we were a two-pony flying brick.

As the dragon drew closer, Mister Topaz opened his maw wide. Glancing back, I saw rows of viciously sharp teeth surrounding a dark, insatiable gullet.

I had an idea. “Keep flying straight.”

Calamity grunted, straining his wings for more speed. “Ah hope y’know what yer doin’…”

I opened my saddlebags and pulled out the rest of my grenades. All of them. I noted with terror-tinged amusement that they really did look like metal apples.

“How do you like…” I whispered as I let go of everything but the stems, sending the grenades right into the dragon’s ravenous throat.

Even as they disappeared, it occurred to me that I may have made a horrible mistake. Dragons can breath fire and eat gems. What made me think a few grenades would cause more than indigestion?

A moment later, I learned my reservations were right as the grenades did absolutely no harm to the healthy parts of the dragon… but blew out his damaged side, warped and deteriorated by potent assaults of magical plasma, in a blast of sick gore.

Mister Topaz, a gaping hole in his side larger than three full ponies, was almost certainly dead before he hit the ground messily and skidded thirty yards, leaving a swath of blood and internal fluids.

Calamity turned and banked, taking us back to the Junction. There were still battles raging in parts of Shattered Hoof, but we had both had enough excitement for the night.

“Oh horseapples,” Calamity said wearily. “Ah almost forgot about Velvet Remedy.” Before I could panic, he informed me, “She’s hid herself in the Visitors’ Center. Ah told ’er I’d be right back for ’er.”

Gently, he set me down, and then flapped back into the night, looking utterly exhausted. I sat there, waiting for him to return, and at some point I fell asleep.

Footnote: Level Up.

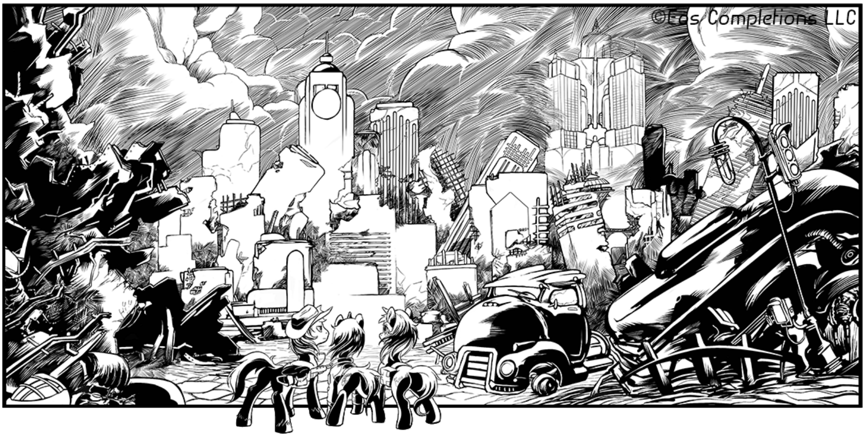
New Perk: Sniper Pony – Your chance to hit an enemy’s head in S.A.T.S. is increased by 25%.

Volume Two

Voices of the Past

Chapter Thirteen

Voices of the Past



"It is a ghost story. They're all made up."

Home.

"Relinquish your rights to the contents of the vault, and she's all yours," Gawd explained as she pointed a wing at Junction R-7. "Do you accept?"

A vault full of memories torn from the minds of ponies two hundred years dead… or a place to call my home.

"Won't you need it?" I asked cautiously. "For defense?"

"Now that I'm running the show, I'll be moving into Shattered Hoof proper. We don't have the numbers to effectively spread between all the outposts anymore. We have t' consolidate and build up new defenses. If we're lucky, Red Eye's slavers will scurry back t' their dens and lick their wounds. I don't trust in luck." Gawd gave a hard smile. "I prefer t' count on people being greedy. Tends t' work much better."

I nodded slowly. "And the ponies here, they won't loot it while I'm away?"

Gawd smirked. I was getting good at asking what she seemed to consider the right questions. "Not if I tell them not t', they won't." With an uncharacteristic touch of warmth, she added, "Everyone acknowledges what you did for them back there. Those that don't feel like they owe you at least have the good sense not t' draw the ire of the local dragon slayer."

I looked at the disabled train and scrap metal shacks, seeing it in an entirely new light. This could be my home. Our home, if Calamity and Velvet Remedy were willing. A place to rest. For Calamity to hang his hat. (Figuratively, at least, considering he even slept with it on, just like he slept in the underbarding for that battle saddle.)

I trotted around it, drinking it in.

There was a water pump out back. Grills for cooking. A small water purifier in what had been Gawd's private quarters. As well as the passenger car, the train included several lockable cattle cars and two boxcars – we could each have our own space, plenty of room for storage. A generator in one of the shacks kept the lights on at night and the refrigerator in the back boxcar running.

I glanced at the guard platform over what had been Gawd's office. Calamity waved his bandaged wing back at me. He was almost finished mounting the tri-barreled plasma cannon in its position. I wondered… Calamity was the only one of the three of us who had any skill shooting that monster manually, but would it be possible for me to rig it up like an automated turret? Thinking of the sky-camouflaged convoy, I knew a perfect place to get the parts.

True, the place was rusted, filthy, full of moldy hay – but most of that could be set to rights with a lot of hard work and a little TLC. The horrible reek from the station house, its bathroom overflowing with manure, was another matter entirely. I glanced over to it, gagging slightly. That would be an arduous and entirely unpleasant task to fix.

Velvet Remedy caught my expression and sing-songed, "Don't think of it as years of piled-up ponypies, Littlepip. Think of it as free fertilizer. We could start a garden."

We! The word filled me with more warmth and joy than direct sunlight possibly could.

My home in the Equestrian Wasteland would be the former house of Gawd. Including her office.

Any hesitation (or concern about why Gawd suddenly wanted a vault full of memory orbs), was washed away by that wonderful "we".

"I'll take it!"

* * *

"Ah don't get it," Calamity muttered. "She's helpin' *raiders* now?"

Together, Calamity and I walked through the rock yard of Shattered Hoof slightly behind Gawd. Velvet Remedy was elsewhere, insisting that she do what she could to mend the injured, despite having completely run out of medical supplies (both our own and those of Shattered Hoof) the second morning after the battle. And even though it was entirely possible that the vile monsters who killed Silver Bell's parents were amongst the wounded rather than the dead.

"Won't be raiders anymore." The voice of Gawd held a finality that was hard to question.

Calamity, being Calamity, did anyway. "Don't change the horrible things that some of 'em did." He shook his mane. "Ah still don't like it."

"That was under Deadeyes." Gawdyna Grimfeathers had led the embattled ponies of Shattered Hoof to victory against Red Eye's slavers. Now, with both Deadeyes and Mister Topaz eliminated, she was the one the ponies of Shattered Hoof were turning to for leadership. "I've got big plans for this place; there won't be any room for honorless monsters in *my* Shattered Hoof."

I watched her, admiring her words and the way she moved. I didn't like Gawdyna, but I couldn't help but respect her. And yes, she was sleek and powerful and very attractive for a non-pony. (And so what if she's a griffin? There's nothing wrong with just looking.) Gawd herself had taken on both of the enemy griffins, felling them with her magical energy shotgun and her talons. She'd picked up a few new scars in the battle. I thought they only made her look more impressive.

I hoped other mares could find them so; I was wearing a scar of my own now. Burns, however horribly painful, could be healed fully with magical remedies. But the malignant damage caused by warping and destructive magical power could not so easily be undone. The small line of corrupted flesh where the magical energy lance had touched my neck would be with me for the rest of my life.

"…will have a few rotten eggs, but they'll be dealt with." Gawdyna was speaking to Calamity. I realized my attention had drifted; I'd been admiring her flanks (in a perfectly respectful way) and lost part of the conversation. "Every other pony is realizing they've spent the last years breaking their hooves for a dragon who intended t' eat them as a reward. They're reassessing their life paths and most will be ready for a change."

Gawdyna smirked, looking at Calamity. "I'll put the fear of Gawd into any who aren't."

Over the last few days, I had learned that Mister Topaz had lowered the cargo lift and was just emerging into the rock yard when I set off that alarm. The dragon's voice was loud, and had carried all the way into the yard. While no pony had been privy to my side of the conversation, several dozen had heard everything the dragon had to say.

Word had spread amongst the survivors. Every pony knew my companions and me by name now and had formed an opinion…

"Hey Littlepip!" a shout rang across the yard from a group of ponies sorting armors stripped off the dead. "Found any good bullets of dragonslaying yet? Did you try Mister Topaz's pantry?"

…some less empowering than others. I rolled my eyes and tried to ignore them.

Focusing forward, I broke into the conversation. "What 'big plans' do you have?"

Gawd stopped and turned, looking me over appraisingly. Clearly, I'd tried to pry at secrets she preferred to keep close to her breast. After a long moment, she gave me as much of an answer as I was going to get, and nothing more than I would have learned naturally in a matter of weeks.

"In the wake of Mister Topaz's untimely splattering, we have enough gemstones to entice caravans and establish trade routes. Shattered Hoof lies within a few days' caravan travel of both Manehattan and New Appleloosa." Gawd fixed me with a knowing grin. "And I hear the Appleloosians are looking for some new trade partners."

I tried not to wince. Just how much did Gawdyna know?

"An' Ah've got a barn in Canterlot to sell ya," Calamity scoffed, giving Gawd a wry smile. "If ya expect me t' believe a hardened mercenary like Gawdyna Grimfeathers is lookin' t' settle down an' play mayor."

Gawd laughed. It was a rich and seasoned laugh. "Yer right. I'm also sending out…" She paused, finding the right word. "Invitations to Talons not currently under contract."

She didn't elaborate further, but I was beginning to get the picture.

"And the memory orbs?" I asked, mostly out of curiosity.

As pleased as I was with the way Junction R-7 was shaping up (especially now that we had sealed up the vomit-inducing stink and started turning my designs for a turret array into a reality), I had begun to suspect that I had gotten the shorter end of the deal. The idea didn't upset me; I had my saddlebags full as it was. If anything, I admired how shrewd Gawdyna appeared to be.

Gawd's eyes narrowed. "None of your concern." About what I expected.

As we reached the end of the yard and stepped into the guard tower, I could hear a radio playing. The ending of an ancient song by Sapphire Shores gave way to the voice of DJ Pon3.

> *"Good evening wastelanders! How's every pony doing? Got some great news for you today! Remember that little Stable Gal who took on the slavers of Appleloosa and saved all those ponies? Well don't ask me how, but she survived takin' a nosedive off a cliff in a speeding train. That's right, fillies and gentlecolts: she's back!"*

Gawd had kept walking, but Calamity had stopped and was staring at me, eyebrows raised and hat tipped back. I felt myself blushing hotly and not knowing why.

> *"And what's she been up to now, I hear you ask? Well, sit down an' put on your listening ears, cuz it's time for DJ Pon3 to tell you a story. Ready? Good. This is the story of a little filly named Silver Bell…"*

I looked to Calamity in distress. I did not like getting credit for what was really Velvet Remedy's good deed. All *I* did was push Watcher into recruiting Ditzy Doo's help.

"Wait 'till he starts callin' ya dragonslayer," Calamity made merry at my discomfort. DJ Pon3 didn't mention my pegasus friend at all, and Calamity seemed unduly pleased by that.

I looked back over the rock yard and the ponies hard at work in the aftermath of the battle. A slightly melancholy feeling took hold in my chest.

The end of the week, I thought. By then, I would have the turrets scavenged from the sky convoy up and running. By then, we would be fully mended and rested. My coat was growing back nicely over where it had burned off. Velvet Remedy had already stopped fussing over Calamity's wing.

Calamity was already getting restless. He had joined me because, like him, I wasn't content to do nothing while others were being abused and murdered. He respected the idea of Junction R-7 as a base of operations, and was already drawing up plans for a workshop in one of the cattle cars, but my pegasus friend was never going to settle down and play happy homemaker.

Velvet Remedy was still fretting over the most gravely injured whom she had been able to save, but I could tell she was beginning to accept there was nothing more she could do which other ponies were not capable of. Soon, she too would desire to leave this place. The nightingale wasn't done flying yet.

I, myself, wanted to stomp out the cruel shadow of Red Eye's slavery that darkened the soul of Equestria – but that was a goal both vague and absurdly ambitious. I had proven I could save individuals, but I wasn't so arrogant as to believe I could actually change the course of armies and economies. In truth, the only tangible goal ahead of me was meeting with DJ Pon3. I was rather counting on him to point me the way. Plus, after listening to his radio broadcasts for the last few days, I really did fancy the idea of getting Velvet Remedy's music onto the airwaves.

By the end of the week, it would be time to go.

* * *

We were ready to go. Except, that was, for Velvet Remedy. I watched her laying on the floor of the train car she had claimed as her own, batting the memory orb we had scavenged from the wreckage of Ditzy Doo Deliveries between her forehooves.

"You still haven't viewed that?" I asked with surprise.

Velvet Remedy looked up at me with a cutely meek stare. "After what you found in the vault? How can I? I've been hoping that it's about Fluttershy… but now." She caught it between her hooves and brought it up to her eyes. "What if it's a confession? What if it's bad?"

I could understand. I remembered my reaction upon realizing Velvet Remedy was not a prisoner of the old Appleloosa slavers. And even though that had turned out to be for laudable reasons, I knew how much it hurt to see the pony you idolize fall from the pedestal you put them on.

"Would you like me to view it first for you?" I offered.

Velvet Remedy smiled gratefully and nodded. She set the memory orb down and backed away.

I took a deep breath, swallowing back a sudden hesitation. I'd never actually viewed a memory orb before. Logically, I knew what to expect: a reliving of some other pony's experience. I'd been told such memories were visual, auditory, tactile… even taste and smell were preserved. But would it be crisp and vivid, or blurred by age? Would I see things as they had really been, or would it be filtered by the perceptions and biases of the rememberer? Would I sense the pony's thoughts? And would I be able to tell them from my own?

I felt a little weak, but also intensely curious. Velvet Remedy was watching me; her presence reminding me why I was doing this.

I knelt. Leaning forward, I touched my horn to the memory orb and focused ever so lightly.

A strange flushing sensation washed over me as the train car, Velvet Remedy and the entire Equestrian Wasteland was obliterated and replaced with an entirely different reality.

* * *

I was standing on a stage, or more precisely the pony whose eyes I was seeing through and ears I was hearing through had stood on a stage.

It was strangely like being paralyzed; I could feel what she (?) felt, but I couldn't move on my own. I suddenly had the urgent desire to bite my lower lip, a desire followed by a flash of panic when I couldn't.

I was looking out over a crowded auditorium in a large and rather nice indoor theatre. Many ponies in the crowd were engaged in conversation, and a low storm of overlapping voices filled the room. Everything was slightly muted and out of focus, but I could still make out the faces of each individual pony – a level of detail that defined this as a raw recording of the events by the brain of the pony I was, for lack of a better word, "riding" rather than what the pony could have naturally recalled on her own. I wanted to take a closer look at the walls of the auditorium – I had the distinct impression that they were not wood paneled but rather actually formed from growing trees, much like the Ponyville

Library. But, of course, I could only watch what this pony had watched.

She concentrated on an elder (yet adorably cute) yellow pegasus with a flowing pink mane falling over much of her face, and a matching pink tail, who walked reluctantly past her towards a podium standing front and center on the stage. The yellow pony stared at the floor as she walked, as if afraid to make eye contact with the crowd before she had the podium between her and them like a shield.

I was struck by the distinct similarity between this pony and the one on the billboard I had seen a week ago, although what string of fortunes could take a pony from being the spokesmodel for carrot-flavored cola to serving as one of the most powerful mares in government was beyond me.

“um… h-hello? Can I have your attention, please? If you don’t mind?”

The massive speaker system of the auditorium magnified the pony’s voice, boosting it up to what nearly reached the volume of normal conversation. And yet, the crowd hushed instantly. Every buck and mare in the crowd turned their attention fully to the yellow mare with the three pink butterflies as her cutie mark. I immediately recognized the pattern. Velvet Remedy had hung the medical boxes in her Appleloosa boxcar so their butterflies would look exactly like that.

“Thank you,” the pegasus squeaked, seeming surprised at being so abruptly the focus of so much attention. It dawned on me that she didn’t have the assertiveness to command their attention like this. The ponies in the crowd didn’t listen out of obedience, much less fear, of the mare on the stage. No, in fact, this wasn’t even respect that I was seeing. This was love.

“Now…um… I know everypony is really, really busy. So I’ll try not to take too much of your time.”

I got it, but I didn’t think she got it. Fluttershy was worried about offending them, or inconveniencing them. From their expressions, I doubted that was even possible.

“Princess Luna has given us… that is… she’s allowed us to… We have a new project.”

I heard a few nickers and neighs rippling through the crowd. No matter how much they loved the mare on the stage, this was clearly not welcome news.

The yellow pegasus eeped, cringing slightly. “Please… it’s okay. I know we’re all overworked, and everypony has *so* much to do already… and you’re all doing just wonderful.” As she added that last statement, she smiled warmly at all of them. If all the water in Stable Two had frozen, that smile could have melted it.

“But… this is really important. I’ve been talking with Princess Luna, and… I really, really want to do this project. I’m behind it completely, and I really hope you will be too.”

The dissenting sounds stopped. Everypony listened.

“This horrible, terrible war has gone on far, far too long and hurt so many people.” I could hear the sadness and hurt in her voice. Sweet, merciful Celestia… I wanted to gallop over and give her a hug. I wanted to lie to her and tell her things would be all right. “So Luna says the Ministry of Peace should work on a way to end the war, and bring everyone, pony and zebra alike, back to the table of diplomacy.”

Some pony (whom I had the distinct urge to buck in the face) actually asked, “If the war ends, won’t we all be out of a job?”

I heard Fluttershy whisper the prayer, “From your lips to Celestia’s ears.”

I stumbled, gasping as if I had been holding my breath, as my own world burst through, flooding over me. I spent a moment steadying myself.

Velvet Remedy was looking up at me with big, beautiful eyes. I smiled to her, levitating the memory orb back to her, being careful to focus around it rather than directly at it so as not to be lost in the memory again.

"It's *not* bad."

* * *

We had traveled for most of a day under the slate grey skies. The cold, dead bones of Manehattan loomed ahead, still at least a day off. But even this far out, the balefire bomb's destructive power had been felt. The flames had not reached anywhere near here, but the massive shockwave had flattened trees and caved in homes.

We approached a small, very humble home set apart from all the others, a few miles farther from Manehattan than the rest of the suburbs which had surrounded the city. The front door of the hut faced away from the city, as if the home itself felt shunned by the urban monoliths in the background. Because of this, the front door had survived entirely intact while most of the hut beyond had collapsed into itself. At this distance, damage from the bomb couldn't have been more than that of a strong windstorm, but it had weakened the other side of the home enough for the decaying effects of age to ravage it.

As we got closer, Calamity whispered, "Somepony's home." He lifted off into the air, stealthily flying forward to get a better look. A moment later, he returned with a smile. "We're good. Got ourselves a wanderin' merchant who's holed up in the ruin. Don't mind the owl; Ah'm pretty sure it's tame."

Calamity spun on his wings and flew ahead to greet the merchant. Velvet Remedy trotted after him, moving around to the small building's (lack of a) west side. As I followed, I noticed that somepony had nailed a recording to the front door. It looked ancient and badly weathered; I suspected it had been there since the owner of the hut had died. I change course, trotting towards the door, and my PipBuck flashed an enigmatic notice on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, letting me know that it had decided to label this particular ruined hut "Trixie's Cottage". I had long since given up trying to understand why my PipBuck kept marking seemingly random locations.

The recording was in horrible shape. I pulled it down, intending to work on it while Calamity haggled with the merchant. In the back of my mind, a voice insisted that this might be hard enough to call for some Party-Time Mint-als. I knew the voice was lying, and I tried to ignore it.

As I rejoined the others, the merchant (a grizzled unicorn stallion with a dust-colored mane and wearing trader barding) was telling Calamity and Velvet Remedy tall tales of the Manehattan Ruins. From the looks he kept giving Velvet, it was clear he had not seen so lovely a mare in… well, a very long time, if ever.

"Ghosts?" Velvet Remedy asked skeptically.

"Yep. That's why I don't venture any further than Fetlock myself. Well, them and the manticores."

"Manticores?" Calamity questioned. "What would forest creatures like those be doing in the ruins of a major pre-war city?"

"Dunno. But the place is lousy with them. Best steer clear."

Velvet wasn't going to give up, "And with… ghosts."

The merchant unicorn nodded. "That's what they say, at least. Keep in mind, Manehattan isn't like Canterlot, where the ponies died slow and painful. In Manehatten, it was like nothing. Happened so fast, the ponies' spirits didn't even realize they were dead."

"Nonsense," Velvet neighed.

The pony finally noticed my approach and gave me a big grin. "Ah, and another customer. Welcome to…" he waved a hoof at the collapsed building around him, "…the Luna-Damned Shithole." Behind him, a robotic owl whirred and hooted from the top of a doorless cabinet. When it opened its metal beak, I could see the gleam of a small magical energy weapon hidden inside. "It ain't much, but it's all mine."

Curiosity got the better of me. "How much for the bird?"

The merchant pony laughed roughly. "Sorry, miss. Old Gearwing ain't for sale. A merchant don't live long in the wasteland if he travels without backup."

I nodded. I passed Calamity the magical energy lance to add to his bartering load and sat down to work on the recording. These things were designed to be ridiculously hardy, but this one had taken one hell of a beating. As I floated out a few of my precision tools, I realized it would be a small miracle if I could get anything off of it.

I had just started working when Velvet Remedy gave a stomp. "No, no, no." I looked up, wondering why she objected to my efforts, only to realize she was neighing to Calamity. Lowering her head, she pushed him away from the merchant.

"What's got yer tail in a twist?" he huffed.

"You're letting him rob you, that's what," she retorted. "Here, let a pony who knows a thing or two handle this."

I watched my companions, bemused. The merchant pony was staring at them with a slight frown. Velvet Remedy returned, and while Calamity watched from behind, she ignored the pile of goods he was trying to sell the pony, not to mention everything he had been hoping to buy; she fluttered her eyelashes at the merchant, giving him a look that sparked a twitch of jealousy in my breast, and asked, "That dress over there, the one in the spring colors? How much is that?"

She haggled, turning on the charm while demurely noting the poor condition of each dress he floated over to her. Before long, she had purchased four dresses for the cost of two.

Trotting over to Calamity, her dresses in tow, she asked him politely, "Now, would you be a wonderful dear and use the fabric from these to fix the damage our awful fight with that dragon did to the magnificent gown Littlepip gave me?"

I felt my heart do a little leap. Calamity was just staring at her, nonplussed. The merchant slowly mouthed "fight with that dragon" as he watched her.

"Whatcha do that fer? Ya didn't even get any medical supplies."

Velvet shrugged off the question. "Pretty please?" she added smiling at Calamity, who got quickly to work.

I went back to tinkering with the recording. After the better part of an hour, I was pleased by my progress. I realized the contents of the recording wouldn't be worth the effort, but by now it had become a challenge. The actual message didn't really matter.

Calamity had finished repairing Velvet Remedy's gorgeous dress. I was impressed. It almost looked as good as new. Velvet smiled and gave him a small kiss on the cheek (eliciting another flutter of jealousy from me), then took the dress and trotted around behind some rubble to put it on. (Which, truth be told, made no sense to me.)

My PipBuck made its last scan of the message, reconstructing it. I had salvaged almost the entire thing. I slipped in my earbloom and listened to what an hour's work had gotten me. I knew better than to expect much, but if it turned out to be a door-to-door advert recording for ties, I was going to be a little miffed.

> *"Whitelip, I'm sorry to miss you this week. You know that seeing you is one of the high points of my week, but I just got the most amazing call. Twilight Sparkle, yes the Twilight Sparkle, called me. Right out of the blue. Isn't that amazing? I mean, I knew her back when she was nothing and I was…*
>
> *"Nevermind. I'm just so surprised she even remembers me. But no, she invited me to Manehattan this weekend to talk about a proposal. Can you imagine? Me, working for the Ministry of Magic! And when the Mare of the Ministry herself personally calls you up to pitch the offer, you know it has to be important.*
>
> *"I… I hesitate to say it, but I'm back. Oh yes, Trixie's life is about to finally turn around!*
>
> *"um… I don't know how long I'll be in Manehattan; but just to be safe, go ahead and leave my usual order on the doorstep: three bottles of milk and a carton of butter. I'll pay you next week. I promise."*

All of that effort, and I'd salvaged an order to the local milk-buck? I'd promised myself I wouldn't be bothered, but I kinda was.

Velvet Remedy had re-emerged, looking impossibly stunning. I'd already seen her in this dress and it still made my legs weak. The merchant pony had not, and was clearly smitten.

"Now then, let's get down to business," Velvet said with a gracious smile, floating the magical energy lance from the pile of goods Calamity had been trying to sell. "Now, I'm not sure you have the caps for something like this, but I'm sure we can come to an arrangement."

"N-not sure I have…?" The merchant tried to regain his footing. "Lady, I'd say that's worth…"

"Quite a lot," Velvet smiled. "Consider: all the power of a magical energy weapon, but in the form of a lance that anypony could use without special training? A devastatingly effective weapon that will never run out of bullets or sparkle packs. No spending your hard-earned caps on ammo; no threat of having to stop and reload at a critical point in battle."

Velvet Remedy lifted it up dramatically. "And just look at its condition! Why, the gemstone alone is worth more than the meager medical supplies your delightful little Shithole has to offer."

She paused, eyeing the magical energy lance. "Why, on second thought, I can't imagine parting with it. Sure, it's a little heavy, but…"

"All right, all right," the merchant unicorn broke in. "What do you want for it?"

I looked over to Calamity. From his expression, he was thinking the same thing. From now on, Velvet Remedy would do all our bartering.

* * *

The body of the radroach crunched grossly under my hoof. I quickly scraped the radroach gunk from my hoof using a collapsed road sign. We'd slept at Trixie's Cottage the night before, and had made good time over the course of the morning.

According to my PipBuck, the maze of blackened, ruined homes we were pushing through had once been the suburb of Fetlock. We were taking it slow; such a large area meant that there were still a dusting of scavenge-worthy items to be found, even outside of locked safes and trunks. Sadly, no medical supplies. Velvet was trying to use the few supplies we got from the merchant sparingly, cutting healing bandages in halves or thirds, but still insisted on cleaning and dressing cuts and scrapes to avoid infection.

Velvet Remedy squealed happily as she opened up an old refrigerator and found several bottles of still-pure water inside. Our canteens were almost empty, and the few working faucets I had found made my PipBuck clickity-click at the radiation levels in the water. Her find was a blessing straight from Luna.

There was no shelter to speak of, and red spots were always crawling across my E.F.S. compass. Mostly radroaches or the occasional giant mutant hedgehogs. The magical radiation that had soaked into the water had twisted a multitude of wasteland's animal inhabitants into grotesque and often monstrous versions of their original species. Most creatures had not survived the transformations.

But at least it wasn't raiders or slavers. It was a relief to not be battling other ponies. Velvet Remedy was beginning to develop skill with her needler pistol; her moral reservations about killing clearly did not apply to ravenous and hostile beasts.

Calamity swooped up to us, having been scouting ahead. "We're in luck. Ah think Ah've spotted someplace fer us t' crash fer the night."

Velvet Remedy and I let him lead the way. Two blocks later, we came upon the hulk of a passenger skywagon. This one was in far better shape than the one I had taken a shortcut through back under the Cloudsdayle outskirts. The paint was blackened by fire and flaking away with age, and what lay beneath was as much rust as metal. But it was fully intact, having been resting at the wagon-stop when the megaspell went off rather than having fallen from the sky.

It had also been loaded with passengers who, along with the wagon pony harnessed to the front, had been burned alive by the rolling wall of bale flame that had swept through Fetlock. The passenger wagon was full of charred skeletons and burnt luggage.

"You want us to bed down in there?" Velvet Remedy asked, looking appalled. "Calamity, that's grim. Even for you."

I stared at the wagon full of pony skeletons and found myself wondering who they had been. What had their lives been like? Had they been happy? I wondered if the wagon had been heading into Manehattan. Were these ponies all heading into work. Were some of them friends, chatting about the shopping they would do?

I squelched those thoughts under a strong hoof. The apocalypse was already a daily assault of horror and sadness without making it worse by actually thinking about it. Doing that could only drive a pony to suicide or madness.

Looking away, I felt a tiny ember of joy as I spotted the flickering light of a Sparkle~Cola machine tucked into a nook just around the corner from the wagon-stop. “I’ll be right back,” I announced, leaving Calamity and Velvet to clean out the passenger wagon. Or argue about it. Whichever.

I trotted around the wall and into the nook, which I immediately realized was much larger than I had imagined. The red dots on my E.F.S. had become so ubiquitous that I’d stopped paying attention to them. Big mistake.

The manticore turned, took one look at the intruder who had just blithely clopped into its den, and let out a roar that blasted my mane back. The carrion stench of its breath let me know I was dinner.

I stared up at the huge, brutish monster with its mighty forepaws, huge wings and venomous tail and was very glad I hadn’t had anything to drink in several hours.

I didn’t have any of my weapons ready; I hadn’t wanted to waste precious ammo on things I could kill with a buck or a stomp. The manticore certainly didn’t fall into that category, but I spun, throwing a kick with both hindhooves at its nose.

It was like bucking a brick wall. Instead of knocking the manticore back, I sent myself forward in a faceplant. The manticore lifted a paw full of large claws and swiped at my back. If it hadn’t been for Ditzy Doo’s armoring, the blow might have cut through my spine. Instead, pain spashed through my bruised back. I scrambled onto my hooves and ran.

The manticore gave chase, bouncing after me. I am short; it was bigger than several stacked apple carts. The chase was brief.

The manticore headbutted me, sending me flying. I hit the street hard and rolled until I hit what was left of the wall of the hardware shop across the street. The manticore charged at me as I struggled to me feet, dazed.

The sound of Calamity’s battle saddle cracked through the air. Blood erupted from one of the manticore’s front legs and it stumbled, missing me to crash instead into an old lamppost. The lamppost tore out of the ground and toppled with an iron thud.

As the manticore recovered, a half-burned dress that must have come from the luggage littering the wagon flew through the air on a field of Velvet Remedy’s magic and tied itself around the manticore’s head like a blindfold.

The manticore lashed out blindly with its poisonous, scorpion-like tail. One of the strikes hit the broken sidewalk less than a foot from me.

Calamity fired again, this time into the side of the creature. I floated out Little Macintosh and took aim, backing away. The manticore shook it’s head violently, tossing the blindfold. I got one good shot off, hitting it’s tail. The power of Little Macintosh cleaved the manticore’s tail in two.

It roared in pain and launched itself at me. This time, I was ready, and dodged swiftly out of the way. I turned back towards it, leveling Little Macintosh at the manticore’s backside. The monster spread its wings and launched itself into the air, flying towards Calamity.

Calamity got one more shot off, blossoms of crimson sprouting in its chest, before the creature plowed into him, knocking Calamity from the sky. Worried for my friend, I turned to see where he had fallen as it circled back. Calamity groaned, not getting up but at least looking intact. His hat was laying on the street not far away.

Velvet Remedy trotted up to me. “You’re the telekinetic expert – try these.” She was levitating along with her a stack of sawblades from the hardware store.

As the manticore swooped towards us, I filled the air with spinning death.

* * *

Velvet Remedy finished watching the Ministry of Peace memory orb (for at least the twelfth time) and was now pretending not to watch me cooking manticore meat. According to my PipBuck, it was relatively healthy… at least as far as meat went. Velvet was eating our last can of corn.

Calamity had polished off our last two cans of beans the better part of an hour ago and then crawled under the passenger wagon to “look at somethin’.” He had yet to come up for air. It was getting quite dark. The wagon was still the best option for a place to sleep, but we would have to do it in shifts.

My whole body ached from getting knocked around by the manticore. I was almost getting used to being in a constant state of pain. Calamity had gotten worse, but his concussion seemed mercifully minor. Only Velvet Remedy made it through unscathed. Still, the fight was worth my aches and pains; the venom sacks from the manticore’s stinging tail were the last thing I needed to build a poisoned dart gun from the schematics I’d found in the old Appleloosa armory.

With a sigh, Velvet Remedy clopped over to the wagon and crouched down, peering under it. “Oh, come out. There’s nothing under there that could be this interesting,” she judged. “You took a really bad fall back there and you still haven’t let me examine you.” With fierce determination, she added, “And this time, I want you to strip completely out of that saddle and let me give you a full examination.”

I popped open one of the Sparkle-Colas I’d found inside the vending machine after the battle and took a sip. Warm, but not quite flat, and deliciously carroty.

Calamity crawled obediently out from under the wagon, a big grin on his face. “Great news,” he announced. “It’s pretty much intact.”

“Whatever are you talking about,” Velvet Remedy asked, cocking her head.

Calamity nodded back towards the passenger wagon. I found myself questioning his definition of intact. The windows were all shattered and there were several gaping holes in the roof. A spot the size of two hooves had rusted through on the left side.

“What Ah’m talkin’ about is that unlike the one y’all saw before, this beauty is more than just an explosion waitin’ t’ happen.” Calamity turned to the wagon and smiled. “Ah could fix ’er up. All she needs is a flux regulator.”

“She?” Velvet whinnied.

“Ayep.” Calamity flapped his wings, lifting into the air.

I raised an eyebrow. “A flux regulator? That’s a pretty specific piece of equipment. Not something we’re likely to find just laying around.”

Calamity came back down to earth. “Yeah, Ah know. But jus’ think. If we did, then Ah could pull alla us, plus any equipment we wanted t’ carry, all over the Equestrian Wasteland. No more mutli-day trots across infested landscape.”

Velvet Remedy nickered. “Oh yes. Because your track record with vehicles has been stellar so far.”

I remembered the train. And the apple cart. Maybe climbing into one that was also a bomb wasn’t such a good idea. I didn’t say so however. No reason to smother Calamity’s enthusiasm. It wasn’t as if we had the part he needed to fix it, and any further hesitations could be put off until we did. Which, in all likelihood, would be never.

Velvet, meanwhile, was prodding Calamity to get out of his battle saddle and barding. “I know you made it yourself, and you prefer to wear it, but really… I’ve been with you two for over a week now, and I still haven’t seen your cutie mark. There’s fondness for sense of fashion and there’s just plain being ridiculous.”

My attention had turned towards my dinner, but I perked at that. Come to think of it, I’d never seen Calamity’s cutie mark either. He was always wearing at least his barding and saddle bags, except when he bathed. And I’d always given him privacy for that, albeit mostly out of disinterest in watching a stallion clean himself.

“That’s cuz Ah don’t have one.”

What? No way. My own cutie mark had taken forever to show, but I’d still had it for years. How could a grown buck not have his yet.

“Oh,” Velvet Remedy looked away, seeming unsure of how she should respond to that.

Calamity gave a low, humorless chuckle. “Ain’t like that. Ah used t’ have one. I just don’t anymore.”

“What!?” Velvet Remedy echoed my thoughts, albeit more dramatically.

Calamity looked at the two of us then let out a long sigh. “Well, hell, Ah suppose y’all might as well know.” He shucked himself out of his battle harness and started tugging at the straps of his barding. “It’s been branded off.”

“What? Why?” Velvet stammered. “Who would do that?”

“Muh brothers,” Calamity said, less evenly than he intended to. “Look, that’s just what they do t’ pegasus like me.”

“Like you?” I asked, remembering he’d said that before.

Calamity nodded. “Ah told y’all ’bout the pegasi. Well, they say that when that megaspell wiped out Cloudsdayle, all the pegasus ponies abandoned Equestria and hid behind their ceiling of clouds. All, that is, except one.”

I had stopped eating; it seemed disrespectful. But I still took a swig from the Sparkle~Cola as I listened to what was obviously going to be a story.

“They say that Rainbow Dash saw what the other pegasus ponies were doing, and turned away from them just as they turned away from all the ponies below…”

“Who?” Velvet Remedy interrupted as politely as she could.

Calamity smiled. “Rainbow Dash. The best of us, in some ponies’ opinion. The one who trained the pegasi inta the most elite and feared fighting force both in and beyond Equestria. The mare of the Ministry of Awesome. The one who…”

I swear Calamity had waited until I was taking another drink to say that. I coughed violently, Sparkle~Cola spraying out of my mouth and nostrils. I would be smelling carrots for a week.

“The Ministry of *WHAT!?”* I gasped, tears in my eyes. I knew I was further derailing Calamity’s story, but I didn’t care.

Calamity grinned at my reaction. “The Ministry of Awesome.”

“And what, pray tell, did they do?” Velvet Remedy inquired.

Calamity shrugged. “As far as Ah know, nothing.”

He elaborated, “Remember when Watcher told us ’bout the Ministries? Well, Ah’d heard it a bit different. The pegasi never told ’bout any of those other mares, but they talked ’bout Rainbow Dash. An’ the story Ah heard was that when Princess Luna told her that she would be given her own ministry, Rainbow Dash immediately proclaimed, ‘Well, then mine will be the Ministry of Awesome!’

“And when asked what such a Ministry would do, she replied, ‘Oh, they’ll figure it out.’ Rainbow Dash herself was too busy fightin’ t’ win the war t’ be bothered with runnin’ some gov’ment office.”

I just stared. There were simply no words.

“That’s… interesting,” Velvet Remedy finally stated. “So this Rainbow Dash was a hero to the pegasus ponies.”

Calamity’s eyes narrowed. “Emphasis on was. She didn’t cotton to their closin’ up the sky an’ retreatin’. So she flew off. Never was seen again. An’ the pegasi? They tossed their opinion of her faster than a filly whose hat is on fire…”

Calamity finished unstrapping his barding. It fell away, revealing a flank marred by a magical brand. His cutie mark had been obliterated, replaced by a gruesome scar that looked like a cloud with a lightning bolt.

“I’m a Dashite,” Calamity said. “To them it means ‘Traitor’.”

* * *

Thunder rumbled overhead.

It wasn’t even noon, and the sky had grown dark enough to be mistaken for early night. The first drop of rain touched down on my nose, followed by a second on my left ear.

We had moved beyond Fetlock into a rolling area of grassy hills occasionally marred by incongruous patches of sand. There was a lake visible at the bottom of the next hill, with a shack and several sunken rowboats on the shore. As we approached, my PipBuck ever-so-helpfully told me it was “SteelHooves Shack” and that I had found it.

I floated out Little Macintosh and used the scope to get a closer look. There were tools lined up against the wall, and I could see the glow from an operational terminal in a sheltered outside alcove. And… were those turrets? There were metal things on the ground near each corner of the shack, hidden by camouflage. It might have just been my recent work on Junction R-7 that had me thinking that way; if they were turrets, they were mostly buried.

“Wait!” I called out, now spotting marred holes in the grassy hillside all around the shack, the aftermath of mines that had exploded. The grass was just high enough that the mines would be fully concealed until you were standing on them.

Calamity and Velvet Remedy both stopped, looking towards me with concern.

I opened my mouth to explain about the mines, but another voice cut me off.

“Well, look who we have!” The voice was regal, majestic and terrifying.

The winged unicorn suddenly appeared directly in front of us, shimmering into existence. Velvet Remedy let out a short squeal.

“We remember you from Appleloosa.”

My jaw dropped. No. No way…

But as I stared, I knew that this was a different pseudo-goddess than the one in the slaver town. Her coloration was nearly identical, but there were differences in her face, mane and flanks.

Patches of air on either side of us rippled and two more of the wicked winged unicorns appeared.

“Invisibility spells?” Velvet Remedy complained, apparently beginning to join in my conviction that the wasteland simply hated us.

The pseudo-goddesses surrounded us. Each one was different, but only subtly, like they were all siblings. I looked around frantically, but the rolling hills were completely bereft of boxcars. A sunken rowboat wasn’t going to cut it.

“You’re not the prize we were looking for,” one of them said.

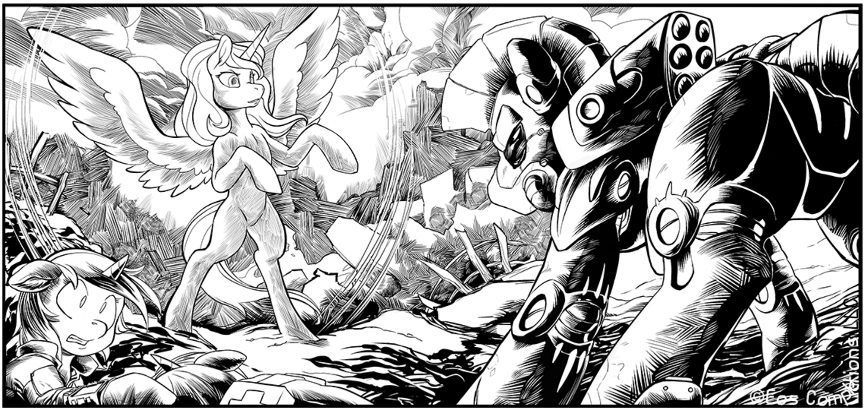
“But it will be a joy killing you anyways,” the third almost purred.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Counter Canter – Your fancy hoofwork (or agile flying if you are a pegasus pony) keeps you out of harm's way. Opponents suffer a -5 to combat skills when attacking you.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SteelHooves



"The Stables were never meant to save anypony."

Explosions!

The world around me was rent apart by a cacophony of violent light and bombastic sound, shocking heat following a roar beyond the might of thunder. The twilight darkness was annihilated by too-bright brilliance.

Time slowed to a crawl, as if sensory overload was causing my own brain to lag. Fire and shrapnel tore at me, sparks of pain igniting all over my body. The roar that filled the world died with a high-pitched whine as I lost my hearing. I was rooted in place, unable to make my body move. Blood splattered across my face as the pseudo-goddess standing in front of me tore apart, the parts of her body savagely flung in every direction.

I felt myself thrown to the ground. Velvet Remedy covered me with her body, her shield forming around us with aching slowness. I could feel a sticky warmth as her blood seeped down, mixing with mine. Only belatedly did I realize that I was not the one being attacked. The second pseudo-goddess was turning, wide-eyed as she brought up her own magical shield. But it was too late for her; the rapid-fire explosions that were killing Velvet Remedy and me just by proximity were ripping directly into the creature. The pseudo-goddess's shield rippled, fluctuated and died before it could fully manifest. Then she too was consumed in a mutilating blaze.

Time snapped back as the rain of explosions momentarily stopped. My vision was warped with afterimages of the creatures, their obliterating bodies flash-burned into my sight. My ears still heard nothing but a distant, nauseating buzz. But now I could see the source of the massive attack. And I had seen this thing before. It was the poster from the recruitment center, come to life before us. A pony completely concealed in steel-grey armor, even its tail. It was a mighty relic from the war, a "Steel Ranger". A bright lamp on its forehead spotlighted its target, and the huge gun on the right side of its monstrous battle saddle began to fire again.

But the last pseudo-goddess had been given plenty of time to bring up her shield as her sisters were slaughtered. And the explosions – which I now saw were metal apples similar to those I had used on the dragon, only being fired at terrifying speed – detonated against the shield while she stood inside, looking cozy, unconcerned, and only mildly pissed. The flames illuminated her midnight-blue coat and sickly green hair, and made her eyes sparkle like gateways to hell.

Again, the Steel Ranger's grenade machine gun stopped. And now a large box on the left side of its battle saddle sprung open, unleashing two rockets which arrowed through the air towards the creature, leaving contrails of smoke in their wake.

The pseudo-goddess merely lowered her head, a spark of light bursting from her horn. In an instant, the two rockets had reversed course. The Steel Ranger tried to step back, but there was no time. The rockets impacted directly into our armored would-be savior, the explosion tossing the massive body back down the hill. The grass erupted in smoke and dirt and flame as the tumbling body bounced over several mines before coming to a stop, motionless and seemingly lifeless at the foot of the shack below.

Velvet's weight bore down on me. We waited for the Steel Ranger to get up, and the world seemed to wait with us. When after long moments it did not stir, the pseudo-goddess strode forward towards it. I could hear her laughter, even though my ears could hear nothing but that awful ringing. In the back of my mind, I realized I must have been right – telepathy played a part in the pseudo-goddesses' threat.

"See now, how the so-called 'Mighty Alicorn Hunter' has fallen!" the majestic and cruel voice of the pseudo-goddess purred in my head. "The Goddess will be most pleased."

The impact of bullets created twin sparks on the pseudo-goddess' shield. Limping and bloodied from the storm of fire and shrapnel, Calamity strode forward. I could see his mouth moving. Undoubtedly, he was saying something snide and witty.

The pseudo-goddess (or alicorn, by her own title) turned and snorted derisively.

Calamity shot again to just as futile an effect.

I shrugged my haunches, trying to tell Velvet Remedy to get off of me, but she did not. Her body was warm, dead weight. I realized her shield spell had dropped, and felt a surge of panic. I heaved, rolling her off, and turned to find my beautiful companion unconscious, her hide flayed by shrapnel, bleeding excessively. With a flare of my horn, I opened one of her medical boxes and started pulling out what supplies we had left. My heart screamed at seeing how little it was. I may have screamed too, but I couldn't hear.

I pulled open the other, hoping for more, but all that was left in the second medical box was her dress, a bottle of Buck and…

…the Party-Time Mint-als!

That voice in my head roared. Velvet Remedy was counting on me. She'd die if I couldn't help her. I needed to be smarter right now! I needed to be better right now! I needed those Mint-als!

The little memory orb rolled out and fell into the grass as I tore the tin of Party-Time Mint-als from her saddle box and floated it to me. A craving hit me, and I had to force myself to only take one. Make them last. One would be…

The world became so much brighter, clearer, cleaner. I was aware of each raindrop as it struck me. I was aware of each pain, each bleeding gash in my own body. My mind sped down pathways of thought.

Once again, brilliant light burst all about us, this time carrying a choking stench of ozone as the alicorn summoned lightning from the thunderclouds and struck Calamity to the ground. I turned, trying to cry out, but I had no voice. Or I did, but could not hear it.

Calamity shuddered, twitching on the ground. He was not dead, not even yet unconscious, but he was in no condition to fight. The alicorn didn't seem to care. A malicious smile broke over her features, cold and wicked, as motes of pinkish-purple light ignited around her head, growing and shaping into magical arrows.

I tried to get to my hooves, but my legs wouldn't work. A wave of felling nausea dropped me. I knew I too was suffering from loss of blood, and the ringing in my ears was shredding my sense of balance. But I also knew that Calamity and Velvet were about to die. So might I, but I would die saving them.

And in the sheer brilliance of Mint-al-enhanced acumen, I knew just how to do it.

My telekinesis did not fail me, even when my body did. I brought my sniper rifle to me as I simultaneously lifted the memory orb and floated it towards the alicorn, moving it so that it approached from her flank. I felt a pang of conscience risking something so precious to Velvet.

The pseudo-goddess turned, catching the movement out of the corner of her eye. She reacted before she recognized it, expecting a grenade, focusing her magic against it to send it hurling back at me.

The memory orb glowed softly as the alicorn touched it with focused magic. Her eyes went wide, her shield dropping and the forming cascade of magical arrows evaporating as the alicorn was lost inside the memory.

Slipping into the targeting zen of S.A.T.S., I lined up the headshot and pulled the trigger.

* * *

"No!" Velvet Remedy intoned harshly, her voice sounding distant and muffled through the buzzing in my ears. She floated the tin of Party-Time Mint-als away from me before I had a chance to take yet another. I'd taken two already, one before killing the alicorn and a second to stave off the massive depression that I knew would come when the first wore off.

"But…!" I tried to come up with something that Velvet Remedy would buy. I was amazing now; I could talk anyone into anything. "At least let me hold onto them. I might need them." And yet somehow, I couldn't convince the most beautiful mare in the wasteland to let me keep a tin full of medicine.

I'd administered the last of the medical potions to Velvet Remedy. The magical liquid seemed to work achingly slowly at closing her wounds. Now she was left with just the healing bandages to aid Calamity and myself. We didn't have anywhere near enough. She was still very weak from the loss of blood, and was having trouble standing. Calamity needed a medical brace to fix his leg; Velvet Remedy didn't want to risk a mending spell until it was properly set. More, he needed serious bed rest to recover from the lightning strike.

There was one more.

I had to wave Velvet Remedy back before I approached the unmoving armored figure crumpled against the shack below. Harnessing my levitation, I could pass over the minefield safely. Velvet Remedy could not.

Between the alicorn's thought-words and the label my PipBuck had spontaneously given the shack, it didn't take Party-Time Mint-al-enhanced smarts to realize that this had probably been SteelHooves.

The great alicorn hunter… meaning there were more of these. Possibly a lot more. The thought was frightening. SteelHooves had exterminated two of them with a combination of surprise and epic firepower. It was by wits and luck that I had killed the third before she slew us all. Last time, I needed a boxcar. These creatures were not invincible, but they were *powerful* and very hard to kill.

The metal stallion (or, at least, I was assuming stallion based on the form of the armor) had not moved since the battle. I crouched down next to the fallen Ranger (several of my bandages shifting and coming undone as I did so, my wounds oozing blood). Up close, the armor was even more impressive. It had its own air filtration system, complete life support, even mechanized drug injection. The damage from the rockets was far less than it had any right to be. Still, the armor had cave in at the point of impact, gruesomely crushing the pony inside.

I tried to find a way to remove the helmet. If there was one, it was well concealed. But I found a jackpoint that would allow my PipBuck to interface with the helmet's own arcane technology matrix. I pulled out a tool from my utility barding, already suspecting that the helmet included its own E.F.S. and S.A.T.S. equivalents, if not more. Whoever had designed the armor must have worked tail-twined-with-tail alongside Stable-Tec.

"Don't do that." The voice from inside the helmet was low, rumbling, exceptionally masculine.

I jumped back, startled. There was somepony alive in there! Fueled by Party-Time confidence, approached, trying to reassure him. "I'm a certified Stable-Tec PipBuck Technician," I lied, but only a little, "I'm sure I can help."

"No. You can't." The voice spoke, but the body still did not move. The helmet did not even turn to look at me. "My armor took a crippling hit. Everything is off-line. Medical, self-repair… the entire spell matrix has crashed."

I sat back on my haunches, wincing as several sharp bolts of pain lashed up through my flanks. "Can you…"

"Without magical power, I cannot even move. I will die here. I am, truly, already dead." The low voice in the armor sounded resigned to the idea, and at peace with it. "But I took them with me. And, if I am not mistaken, I saved the Stable Dweller. As a final act, it was a good one."

I was taken aback. My overblown reputation. A deep discomfort stirred inside me. It wasn't right for other ponies to risk their lives for me, thinking of me as something special.

I stared at the Steel Ranger, not dead but paralyzed. If the armor had no power, jacking into it wouldn't do any good. I looked back towards Velvet Remedy, wishing I had actually taken some time to learn more about medicine from her rather than just relying on her skills. I contemplated lifting her over the minefield.

Turning back to the fallen armored pony, "Okay… SteelHooves, right?"

"How did you… oh. Of course."

Of course what? Shaking off the confusion, I continued, "I'm bringing our medic over." Without another word, I turned and focused my magic on Velvet Remedy. She floated into the air with a shocked eep. She started to float through the air towards us.

"Littlepip, put me down!"

"Minefield," I said casually.

"Okay, move me, *then* put me down."

A moment later, she had joined us. She gave me a ladylike nicker and turned to look over the armored hunter. As I informed her of what he had told me, my mind flashed to the poster I had seen on the wall of Candi's clinic: "You don't have to be a Steel Ranger to be a Hero. Join the Ministry of Peace today." I looked at Velvet Remedy, knowing she must be familiar with the same poster from somewhere, and wondered if she was remembering it as well.

* * *

"You need not bother," SteelHooves insisted. "There's nothing to be done. I've had a good gallop…

"Nonsense," Velvet Remedy neighed, brushing off the Steel Ranger's morbidity. "Now we just have to get you out…"

"No," the low, gravelly voice said again.

"Sorry?" Velvet asked, confused. She had spent several minutes examining the armor, looking increasingly worried. "Even if the armor protected you from burns and slashes, you've suffered massive blunt trauma. The internal damage could…" As she spoke, she began to wrap the armor in a soft magical glow.

"Don't remove my armor."

Velvet Remedy whinnied. "Oh please, I just went through this with Calamity. I can't treat you if I can't see you…"

"If you remove my armor, I will die."

I blinked, gaping at him, eyeing the huge dent crushing into his side. I didn't possess Velvet Remedy's medical insight, but I could imagine that the armor was the only thing holding him together.

Velvet pulled back, canceling her spell. "Well, that seems like a design flaw."

"The armor is meant to keep me alive," SteelHooves said a touch defensively. "Open the armor plate over my left flank." Velvet Remedy did so, revealing a system for administering drugs and medical potions, everything from Buck to…

"I don't even recognize some of these drugs," Velvet said, in surprise.

"The armor has a doctor enchantment. If it was working, I would be fully healed already."

I was still looking over the injection system, casually observing, "It doesn't have a system for Party…"

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy scolded, silencing me.

I stepped back, cowed. I turned my mind from the drugs, instead focusing on the failure of the magically powered armor's spell matrix. If this was a PipBuck, I could easily…

"Wait," I blurted, already knowing exactly what to do.

Velvet Remedy gave me a look. "Littlepip…" she hissed dangerously. I couldn't blame her. It had been only a second since I made that other observation; she didn't have any appreciation for how fast I could think right now. (If she did, maybe she wouldn't be so fast to take my Party-Time Mint-als away.)

"No, I know how to fix him! I can restore power to the armor and reboot the spell matrix." I beamed. "The suit designer obviously incorporated Stable-Tec arcane technology. It's really not that different from fixing a PipBuck."

Velvet's expression softened. "Well then, don't just stand there," she smiled, backing out of my way, careful not to move closer to the minefield.

I trotted forward, and came crashing back to reality. Recognition of my mistake mixed with the crushing depression that flooded me in the wake of Party-Time Mint-als wearing off. In a moment, I was stupid, ignorant and dumb.

"I-I can't," I moaned.

"But you just said…"

"I don't have the tools." I felt like crying. The Steel Ranger was going to die, imprisoned in his armor, because I *wasn't* a certified Stable-Tec PipBuck Technician. My utility barding didn't include a spell matrix master key. Reluctantly, I admitted as much.

Velvet Remedy walked to me, wobbling a little, still faint from loss of blood. She wrapped her tail over me, whispering comfortingly into my ear.

"A spell matrix master key?" The voice of SteelHooves sounded hopeful rather than resigned. "You might be able to find one in Stable Twenty-Nine."

* * *

We were going into another Stable. I felt myself tremble at the thought. From apprehension more than physical weakness, I assumed; Velvet Remedy had rebound my wounds.

Calamity limped up to me. "Remember, Littlepip. This isn't your Stable." I nodded. I was still in the grips of post-PTM depression. I knew I wasn't in any condition, mentally, to be doing this. But SteelHooves needed the help, and we owed him.

"I've changed my mind," the Steel Ranger protested. "I cannot allow you to go into a Stable for me." His sense of hope had swiftly been squelched by a stubborn nobility that I both understood and rejected. I wasn't the only one.

"Oh? Well then, come right over here and stop us," Velvet Remedy suggested. Then added, "Oh right. You can't."

"Your bedside manner is horrible," the voice from inside the armor reported.

I looked at the three of us. We were in no condition to travel into unknown and likely hostile territory. Each one of us could barely stand.

"I won't tell you where the entrance is," SteelHooves said dissuasively.

Calamity whinnied. "Ponyhole cover marked Stable Twenty-Nine? Near the Fetlock passenger wagon stop?" SteelHooves pointedly said nothing. Calamity leaned over and whispered, "And Velvet Remedy thought there was nothin' interestin' under the passenger wagon."

It took us much longer to reach it than I remembered. We were moving gingerly, avoiding marks of red on my E.F.S. compass. Right now, I felt a few radroaches could finish us off.

Calamity was flying, keeping all weight off his leg. He looked at the passenger wagon and announced too-cheerfully, "Well, I hope your levitation is back to its full impressiveness, Littlepip. Unless we've found a flux regulator and nopony's told me, moving that thing will be up to you."

I laid down. I needed to focus fully on the passenger wagon (*Sky Bandit Stages,* I noted pointlessly), and that meant not diverting my energies to remaining upright. My horn lit up as I concentrated on the huge wagon. Magical power enveloped it. I pushed, converging all my will onto moving the vehicle. My horn flared. A layer of overglow burst around it. The wagon began to rock, groaning. Sweat broke across my forehead. I began to have trouble breathing. Somewhere distant, Velvet Remedy was being concerned, but I blocked it out. A second layer of overglow erupted around my horn, and the whole wagon lifted several feet into the air and was shoved back onto the sidewalk.

I let it down gently, then collapsed, exhausted. I could see the ponyhole cover. Yay. Sleep now.

* * *

"How long was I out?" I asked, aghast.

"Long enough to get some much needed sleep," Velvet soothed. "I rested my eyes a little myself."

We were in a short maintenance tunnel. On one end, a door led to even more maintenance tunnels that snaked all under Fetlock. On the other, three steps led up to the massive door of Stable Twenty-Nine. Calamity was standing on three hooves (his crippled foreleg lifted) and staring at the control mechanism.

"Well, this was a bust," he proclaimed. It looked like Stable Twenty-Nine had never opened. And without an override password, it was unlikely that we would be getting in. Still, I went to work at it. My mind still felt sluggish, and I considered munching a Mintal (even the non-Party flavor would help), but I didn't want Velvet Remedy or Calamity to think I needed them. I didn't. They just made me a better me.

After invading the control system and thoroughly probing it, I found something interesting. "I… think I've found a backdoor."

"Where?" Calamity asked, looking up at the ponyhole. "Is it far?"

I shook my head. "No, I mean, into the system. A three-part key is required to bypass the normal security."

"What kind of key?" Velvet Remedy questioned.

"Voice recognition. Three different voices are required," I informed them. Then, before anypony pointed out the fact that there were coincidentally three of us, I explained, "It has to be the right three voices. What is being said doesn't seem to matter, just who's saying it."

It was a very interesting backdoor at that. I wondered just what prompted such a design. And if all Stables had the same security hole.

"Whose three voices?"

I thought a moment, and cursed how slow my brain was. "I… um…" Then I remembered Stable Two's override code. CMC3BFF. "I think I know."

The first voice was the one that took the longest, simply because I didn't have a recording of it. Instead, we sat there listening to DJ Pon3 on the radio, waiting for his selection of songs to cycle through. For the first and only time, I was actually grateful that his radio broadcast had such a limited selection of music.

> *"Good evening, everypony! This is your humble host, DJ Pon3, master of the airwaves. And it's just about time for me to turn in. But first, the news! Looks like our wasteland crusader from Stable Two is an equal-opportunity savior. From the reports I'm getting, she and her companions helped out a bunch of raiders up at Shattered Hoof from being enslaved and decimated by an attacking slaver army. And then, because you can't have a cupcake without icing, she killed a dragon!"*

Luna dammit, why wasn't it ever "Calamity and his companions?" Or Velvet Remedy and her entourage?

> *"Don't know if I agree with you on this one, kid. Saving raiders? Some monsters deserve to be enslaved."*

Perfect.

> *"Also in the news: got another report of hellhounds attacking travelers in the wasteland between Manehattan and Fillydelphia. Honestly, ponies, if you have to travel that way, make sure you have a heavily armed escort. And if you don't, just don't. This has been a DJ Pon3 pony survival tip. Tune in for more tips in this series, including 'Grenades aren't for eating' and 'Raiders do not want to be your friend.' But first, it's Sweetie Belle singing, 'The Dark Days Are Over'…"*

I leapt up. "Here we go, ponies!"

Back at the controls, I fed the voice pattern recognition spell the first few lines of the song, mentally noting to record the song for use if I had the deep misfortune to have to enter a Stable a third time.

I followed with snippits of two recordings:

> *"The override code for opening the door to Stable Two is… CMC3BFF."*
>
> *"Hello! My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me (since I am pretty famous) for my awesome performances at events like last year's GALLoPS, or maybe just as the founder of Red Racer…"*

With a mighty hiss and a draconic groan of protest, the door to Stable Twenty-Nine began to move.

I turned to find Velvet Remedy walking past me to face the door. The gorgeous mare had donned her beautiful dress and groomed her mane. I shot a look to Calamity, who merely shrugged. "um… Velvet?" The dress hid most of her bandages.

"We're meeting the ponies of another Stable for the first time. We want to put our best hoof forward," she said aristocratically. "Especially if they've never had outside visitors before. We want to look like diplomats," her eye moved to look at me without turning her head. "If you two went in first, we'd look like invaders."

The vast metal door swung away and Velvet Remedy stepped into Stable Twenty-Nine regally and without hesitation. Calamity limped up to me as I watched her disappear inside. “She’s really somethin’, ain’t she.”

“Yes…” I said, feeling a little dumbstruck. I glanced at Calamity, who was staring through the door at Velvet. “…she…” I did a double-take. Calamity wasn’t looking at Velvet Remedy, he was *looking* at her. Something broke in my brain. “…no!”

No, that was just… no.

“No?” he asked, confused, his eyes not leaving her haunches.

I stammered, recovering. “no, not no. I mean… yes. Yes she is. She’s…” Mine.

Dammit!

* * *

This was *not fair.*

I loved Velvet Remedy. I had since long before Calamity ever met her. Yes, yes I knew I didn’t actually have a chance with her. She was… *her!* And I was just… me. And I knew all about swinging barn doors.

But… arrugh.

I took the mental image of Calamity successfully wooing Velvet Remedy when I could not and shoved it into a deep dark hole. Then filled in that hole. Then built a house on top of that hole and moved into it.

I focused instead on the pristine but extremely gloomy interior of Stable Twenty-Nine. At first glance, it looked perfectly preserved. A gasp from Velvet Remedy shattered that illusion.

Velvet was backing away from the remains of a skeleton dangling overhead from part of the door mechanism, its midsection pulverized.

Velvet wavered, looking about to faint. I grimaced, looking to Calamity, who rushed over to steady her. This was an ominous start.

Two metal doors offered us two options: Maintenance or Atrium. My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was clear of any red. For that matter, it was completely clear of anything other than my two companions. There was no life in this Stable. At least, not within the range of my PipBuck’s spell. The Stable was utterly silent, save for the ever-present high-pitched hum of the lights and the gentle rumble of the generators.

“This place is a tomb,” Calamity voiced.

Maintenance should take us directly to the PipBuck Technician’s stall. But the Atrium would lead to the clinic, and we were in desperate need of medical supplies. On the off chance there was something lurking in Stable Twenty-Nine, we needed the medical supplies before we did any wandering. I passed my logic by Velvet Remedy and Calamity, and they both agreed, Calamity wincing as the hoof of his injured leg brushed the floor.

I stepped forward and the door to the Atrium slid up. Stepping in, my eyes immediately fell on the skeletons of at least three dozen other ponies. They were strewn about the room, but the highest concentration was right at my hooves. I had to use telekinesis to create a path through the bones of the ponies “lucky enough” to have made it into a Stable before the megaspell destroyed Manehattan. I felt anger biting at the back of my head. I reminded myself it wasn’t my Stable.

There was a lot of other debris in the Atrium as well. Bottles of beer and whiskey, scotch and wine, most of them empty and many shattered. Dresses and gentlepony-wear turned greasy with decay. In the far back, a sound system was riddled with bullet holes.

"Do you think they…?" Velvet's voice trailed off. She was looking behind us, just above the door we had come through. Two automated security turrets were mounted on the wall. They had power, but didn't seem to be tracking us. My E.F.S. claimed they were not a threat. The room suggested that had not always been the case.

I looked up towards the circular window of the Overmare's office, only there wasn't one. The wall was blank and featureless where that window should be. The stairwell that should lead up to the security center and Overmare's offices was there, but it was simply labeled: Security.

I found myself getting irrationally upset at the incorrectness of the Stable's design. Again.

Behind me, I heard Calamity whispering to Velvet, "She's had bad reactions to a Stable before." What, was I that obvious? "We better keep an eye on her."

Oh perfect. Now they were going to be my parents. Arrugh. "Okay, there doesn't seem to be any immediate danger. We should split up to save time. Velvet, why don't you raid the clinic." It was safe. I could see into the clinic through the Atrium window. Calamity and I will head down to maintenance."

Velvet Remedy argued, "No, Calamity should stay with me."

I barely kept myself from stomping.

Velvet Remedy continued simply, "I want to mend that leg as soon as possible. I can use my magic to heal the bone once I have it set properly."

Fine, I groused mentally. Then, sounding as pleasant as I could, "Of course. No problem. I don't need any help finding the PipBuck Technician stall anyway." That is, assuming any of the rest of this place isn't laid out bizarrely. "I'll be back before you're done."

I started to trot back through the door. Velvet Remedy stopped me with a soft voice. "Littlepip? Are you all right?"

I waved a hoof. "Oh yes. I'm just… feeling a little drained. Blood loss, you know." I put on a good smile. She looked like she was trying to be convinced. "Okay, I'm a bit surprised. But I'm happy. It's a good thing that my two friends *like* each other."

Calamity coughed. "Wait, what?" He nickered, "She's a self-righteous, self-idolizin' elitist who'd rather fix up our enemies than shoot 'em."

Velvet Remedy shot him a scowl. "And he's an impulsive ruffian who thinks he can fix the wasteland by drowning it in blood."

By the Goddesses, could they be any more obvious!

I left before I screamed.

* * *

I spent the rest of the trip down through Stable Maintenance reminding myself that it actually was a good thing that my friends got along, that it was stupid to be jealous when I'd had no real chance to begin with, and that if I wanted to keep those friends, I'd best bury these feelings in that same dark hole.

I wondered just how long this had been going on. Was it new? Had there been signs that I was too oblivious to catch? Or had I just not wanted to catch them?

The idea of "catching them" brought an entirely unwanted mental image of Velvet and Calamity to mind that I quickly shredded and burned. This was going to be hard.

You know what would make being cheerful for them easy? A little pony in my head waved a tin at me. Fuck that little pony. I wanted to wallow just a little longer.

A little light appeared on my E.F.S. compass. It was not hostile. Did one of them come down here after me? If so, how did they get ahead of me?

A moment later, a maintenance bot hovered out of one of the stalls, its multiple limbs bobbing as it cleaned the wall. No wonder this place looked spotless. I felt a spark of annoyance that we didn't have a wall-washing robot in Stable Two Maintenance. I'd had to wash the walls of my stall by hoof.

The robot started to clean in my direction. I decided to get out of its way by ducking into the Robotics Technician stall. The room was filled with maintenance bots in various states of disrepair. There were enough tools in here to upgrade Calamity's workshop plans. I began looting.

The Robotics Technician's back office had been burned black. I found the charred skeletons of two ponies along with a partially-dismantled medical bot. From the looks of it, somepony had made a fatal error while working on it, causing the sanitary flamethrower to go off wildly.

The maintenance bot passed by in the hall.

At the back of the burned office was a safe, the paint on the wall around it bubbled and peeling. The safe itself had feared nothing from the fire. I slipped out my screwdriver and a bobbypin, only to discover the safe wasn't locked. Already in a bad mood, I felt cheated.

Inside was a flask of apple whiskey, a pouch of two-hundred-year-old (Old-Fashioned Gourmet) Honey Drops, a tin of (sadly normal) Mint-als, several maintenance clipboards and a recording. Leaving the clipboards, I downloaded the recording into my PipBuck and gave it a listen.

> *"This is Mender, reporting on diagnostics progress for Cannikin's household utility bot. Stayed up all night probing through this thing's programming; wanted to have this report ready in time for the funeral.*
>
> *"From what I can tell, looks like the robot suffered a glitch while receiving an automated update to its subroutines from Stable-Tec. That's really the only explanation I have of how it gave Cannikin a cup of steaming hot industrial solvent rather than coffee.*
>
> *"All those ponyfolk who whispered old Cannikin was going to drink himself to death are probably choking on their words right now. If not, they should be. I saw the poor fellow before they incinerated him – his whole mouth and throat were eaten away. I've had nightmares about it for days.*
>
> *"I plan to talk to Shadowhorn later today; I want all the house-helpers to be shut down until we can check each one of them. Of course, that's going to take some doing, and a lot of time.*
>
> *"I know it's uncomely of me to use Cannikin's death to push my own agenda, but this is just another example of why I think we need an in-Stable authority. How can the ponies of Stable-Tec possibly expect to properly govern the Stable if they're not here, seeing what's going on?"*

That was unexpected. And gruesome. I tried to shove the mental image of Cannikin out of my head, centering my thoughts instead on the idea of a Stable without an Overmare at all. A Stable run remotely by Stable-Tec.

⁂

The PipBuck Technician's stall was right where it was supposed to be. I was surprised, relieved, and a touch annoyed that I should feel either.

The Technician's spell matrix master key was locked away in a cabinet along with a dozen other enchanted precision tools that mere apprentices like myself were not allowed access too. I floated out my screwdriver and a bobby pin once more.

A few minutes later, my armored utility barding was fully-loaded with everything I could need for advanced PipBuck repair. And, at least in theory, everything necessary to restore the flow of magical power to SteelHooves' armor. And just in case, I packed several spark batteries and a small magical field conducting array.

The office of this Stable's head Technician lacked the hammock that had so often bore my teacher's weight back in Stable Two. I shook my head, giving the stall one more look before leaving to rejoin my friends. I spotted an audio journal amongst the items scattered across the Technician's desk.

Sit here and play the journal? Or trot back to find Velvet Remedy and Calamity. Together. Hopefully not kissing. Okay, journal it was.

> *"Shadowhorn called us into a meeting this morning. We nearly had a major disaster yesterday. That idiot Buckbright built his colt a BB gun for his birthday, then brought the kid down to the reactor level for target practice. What was he thinking? Kid missed a radroach and punched a small hole in the environmental system. Actually nicked the water talisman. Thankfully, it's working fine, but another half an inch and the whole Stable would be in serious trouble.*
>
> *"As head of Maintenance, Shadowhorn laid down a whole new series of safety protocols. They aren't official until she gets them passed through Stable-Tec, but we're going to follow them anyway. If Stable-Tec doesn't like somepony giving the orders for them, well they can trot themselves down here and say differently."*

⁂

Velvet Remedy pushed three jars of extra-strength restoration potion over to me. "Drink these. You'll be in perfect health in ten minutes."

I was shocked. "Shouldn't we take these with us? Use them sparingly?"

Velvet Remedy shook her head. She was looking a lot better. She had stowed away her dress and removed her bandages; her hide was perfect, her coat looked pristine and healthy. She had a couple IV bags draped over her haunches, with surgical tubing running to a spot beneath her left shoulder. "No need. I've already stored a dozen more away for our travels, plus plenty of bandages, some braces, blood packs and more. For the first time, we're positively flush with medical supplies. I'd say this clinic was a gift from the Goddesses, but I know better."

I raised an eyebrow as I floated the first potion to my lips. Velvet Remedy slid me a recording. “I found this while I was… requisitioning supplies.” I smirked at her reluctance to call it looting or scavenging.

I downed two of the extra-strength restoration potions and slipped the third into my saddlebags. Memories of Velvet, her hide shredded and bloody, had resurfaced in my mind. I could handle being mostly healed if it meant I had one of these ready in case of an emergency.

Calamity was also looking much better. He complained that after Velvet Remedy’s mending spell, the brace wasn’t really necessary, but she insisted he keep it on for at least another day.

I walked about the clinic, looking for a good spot to sit down and listen to the recording. I frowned at it, expecting bad things. Recordings so rarely carried good things in the Equestrian Wasteland. Especially, it seemed, in Stables.

I found a chemistry lab in the back of the clinic. For a moment, all thoughts of the recording fled my mind. Looking over the drugs and supplies, I realized that along with what I had already, I had all the ingredients to cook up my own batch of Party-Time Mint-als! And having the ability and opportunity, I couldn’t resist. It would have been silly to.

As I started work, I remembered why I had come back here. I let the recording play as I ground down the regular, boring old Mint-als into a fine powder.

> *“Oh…”*

The voice was so filled with raw despair that I quickly shut the recording off. I didn’t want to hear that. I concentrated on my chem cooking for several long minutes, the recording just sitting there on the counter staring balefully at me. Finally, with a huff, I turned it back on.

> *“How could this have happened?!*
>
> *“The doctor and I just stepped out for a few minutes. When we came back, the clinic had sealed itself and the fire suppression system had activated, flooding the entire clinic with… with…*
>
> *“It took us over an hour to get it open again. We tried breaking through the window, but it’s armored. Why would they armor the window? Everypony inside had choked to death. Lemongrass had only been in there to have her stitches out. She was planning for her daughter’s Cute-ceañera this evening, and had been talking to me about what flavor of cake to get from the dispensers. The Orange’s new colt was still in the clinic nursery! Oh gosh! I don’t think anypony’s told them yet!…”*

I shut it off again. My heart was twisted up in knots. Part of me wanted to cry. Part wanted to rage at something. But there wasn’t anything obvious to rage at. So I raged at the faucet, beating my hooves against it for refusing to give me water. It was stupid, but it felt good. Finally (after pouring water from my canteen), I finished mixing the concoction and set it to bake.

The sound of machine gun fire snapped my attention away. All thought of journals, Mint-als and chemistry evaporated when I heard Velvet Remedy cry out. My friends were in trouble!

As I turned, two red spots lit up on my E.F.S. compass. The turrets had become hostile. Dashing back into the central clinic, I saw Calamity and Velvet ducking under an overturned medical bench as the two turrets outside (above the now-closed door) peppered the glass window. Pock-marks and spiderweb cracks covered every inch of it, the armored glass about to give.

Floating out Little Macintosh, I positioned myself where I would be able to target both of them the instant the glass came down. I didn't have much cover, but if I was fast and just a little lucky, I wouldn't need it.

The window broke apart in a tinkling cascade. I felt the first bullet slam into my chest, not quite punching through my armor, as I girded myself with S.A.T.S. and targeted both turrets twice. A second bullet ripped through my foreleg between my PipBuck and my knee as I fired off the first shot. And the second.

BLAM! BLAM!

The first turret exploded. The second swept its arc of bullets away from Calamity and Velvet Remedy and towards me.

BLAM! BLAM!

One last bullet struck my side, bouncing off the handle of my combat shotgun with a loud crack, as the second turret exploded.

I collapsed, suddenly realizing that I was yet again in a truly bad amount of pain. But this time I had no worries at all. I had Calamity and Velvet Remedy right nearby, and we were in a clinic. If I had to be shot, I couldn't think of a better place or better company.

But as soon as I hit the floor, I struggled back to my hooves, ignoring my injuries. Limping, bleeding badly, I tried to push back towards the chemistry lab. I had to make sure my Party-Time Mint-als didn't overcook. Now that my friends were safe, my mind locked on what had become a decidedly second but still important priority.

* * *

The Atrium door had closed and locked. We were sealed inside.

It was more of an aggravation than a real worry. I knew that I should be able to override every door in this place from the Security station. But reaching it meant getting past several more points where the suddenly trigger-happy security system could attack us.

I looked to my companions. By now, I was beginning to think of us as seasoned warriors of the wasteland (well, at least Calamity and I). I hadn't been out here long, but the time had been a forging fire if there ever was one. A few turrets shouldn't pose much threat to the slayers of dragons.

I quickly checked myself. That kind of thought was dangerous. The last thing I needed was to start buying into the hype on the radio.

Velvet Remedy was looking at me sadly. I think I was fast enough, but I was guessing that she suspected what I was up to in the chemistry lab. She hadn't taken her eyes off me since, and the reproachful look was burning into my soul.

Calamity was gazing over something on the wall. At first, I assumed it was another pre-war poster – he was studying it with the same intensity that Velvet Remedy usually reserved for anything involving the Ministry of Peace. But as I moved closer, still slightly limping on my own mended and bandaged leg, I saw that it was a map of the Stable. My eyes followed the path up the stairs to the Security station. The armory was up there, as well as a series of rooms that in a proper Stable would have been the Overseer's personal and family quarters. Here, it was labeled as V.I.P. (Very Important Ponies) rooms. There was a big area of absolutely nothing where the Overseer's Office was supposed to be.

My brow furrowed. "I really hate these Stables."

Velvet Remedy was looking back over the skeletons, while keeping me within her line of sight. "Was… was the other one you found this bad?"

"Worse," neighed Calamity.

We moved towards the stairs, stopping at a bulletin board covered in the usual notices. I shrank back; somepony had written "STOP KILLING US!" across the board in what looked like blood.

"Oh my," Velvet whispered. To my surprise, she magically tugged one of the notices off the board, floating it closer for inspection. The notice had been between a posting of new safety regulations and a flier for two missing fillies whose smiling faces had stared into an atrium of corpses for centuries. The bottom part of the "N" was painted on the sheet Velvet had taken. I stared from the bulletin board to her, wondering how by Luna's Mane she could find anything more noteworthy than the giant plea for mercy written in a dying pony's own bodily fluids.

Velvet Remedy turned the flyer so that Calamity and I could see.

Third Month Survival Party!
Tonight in the Atrium!
10 o'clock to 16 o'clock
Stable 29's own Vinyl Scratch hosting
(alcohol will be provided after twelve)

Calamity whistled, tilting up his hat. "Vinyl Scratch. The original DJ Pon3… least accordin' t' some. So, she survived the Manehattan balefire bomb after all."

I shot Calamity a look that suggested he needed to revisit his definition of "survived".

I really hated these Stables.

* * *

Between stealth and Little Macintosh, the other turrets proved little threat. I reloaded as we pushed into the Security station. I sat down to hack the terminal, trying to be respectful as I floated the pony skeleton off of it and laid it down in the corner near the others. Velvet Remedy had begun saying prayers over them.

Calamity trotted to the armory in the vain hope he could open it without my skills. Discovering he couldn't, he turned away with a disappointed expression. I waited until he took a step away before opening the door remotely from the easily-hacked terminal. He jumped, then shot me a grin and disappeared inside. A petty but good-natured revenge; I was still smelling carrots.

I turned back to see a huge mass of security logs. Tentatively, I brought up one of the later ones.

Entry 67:

This is insane!

Over half the population is dead. At first, we thought they were freak accidents, but now it's clearly malevolent. It's like the Stable itself has

> *turned against us! Yesterday, the school sealed itself and plasma was vented into the room. Twenty-three colts and fillies were murdered horribly, their bodies literally melting away! We could hear their screams! My nephew was in the class. He'd just gotten his cutie mark; he was going to grow up to be an artist!*
>
> *My sister can't stop crying. She's locked herself in our room with all the pictures she has of him. Somepony has to be responsible for this. Somepony has to pay!*

I found myself shaking, and not from pain. I commanded the security terminal to play one of the older ones.

Entry 43:

> *Shadowhorn passed away last night from complications after being nearly electrocuted early yesterday morning while trying to access the junction behind a security panel with her PipBuck. This, so soon after Buckbright and his son were killed in that accident with the lift! This Stable's a death trap.*

I hit another.

Entry 72:

> *It's Stable-Tec. It has to be! Those fuckers at Stable-Tec have locked us all in their little fucking death maze and are killing us off. It's not even one-by-one anymore. They're slaughtering us in groups!*
>
> *What kind of sadistic bastards could do this!? They've killed children!*
>
> *Don't they realize we're the only chance for ponykind? These Stables are supposed to save us! What kind of evil saddlefuckers play murder games with the last surviving members of their own species?*
>
> *We can't even get at them. It's all done remotely.*

I brought up the next one, ignoring Velvet Remedy's plea for me to stop.

Entry 73:

> *Ha. Ha. The jokes on us, isn't it? It occurs to me that we don't actually know that the megaspells went off. We believe the world above has been destroyed because that's what Stable-Tec told us to believe. But what if it's not? All of Equestria is just going on about their daily lives in the sunny world above us while we scream and cry and die down here in some depraved amusement for the sick, soulless ponies at Stable-Tec.*
>
> *It's the only thing that makes even a breath of sense in this horror.*

I reached to trigger another when Velvet Remedy physically pulled me away from the terminal.

"WHAT!?" I yelled in pure rage, my body shaking so hard I felt like I would explode.

"Littlepip," she said, and I realized she was crying, "You need to stop."

⁂

Calamity and Velvet Remedy sent me off to look over the last two rooms, the V.I.P. rooms, while they turned off the security systems and opened all the doors. That was good. They wanted me to catch my breath. Calm down. I wanted to find a place away from them and something to violently destroy.

I was seeing red like never before, and I couldn't even attack the source of my anger because they were all dead. Dead decades and centuries ago. My body hadn't stopped shaking.

The first room had a banner lit up above it: Vinyl Scratch. This was her room then. The original DJ Pon3. I stepped forward and the door slid open.

The room inside had been untouched since the night of the party, three months after the door of Stable Twenty-Nine closed, trapping everypony inside.

I walked about, staring. Stacks of records. Turntables. Recording equipment. A rather luxurious if small space to eat and sleep. A private lavatory with a full-body bath.

I could throw quite the rage in here. The records would shatter beneath my hooves quite enjoyably. But I couldn't do that. Destroying the things that had been loved by the ponies who lived here (ever so briefly) didn't feel like railing against the vile ponies that had created this place; rather, it would be a continuation of their work. Instead, I collected a few records, slipping them into my saddlebags. When I returned to the others, I would have Velvet Remedy lock them in one of her medical boxes where it would be safe from bullet fire. I still remembered that apple.

There was a safe in the room. I hesitated. Somehow, it felt a little odd breaking into the safe of a celebrity, even a long-dead one. But with a long breath, I brought out my tools and set to work. Inside I found an old child's toy, several framed photographs and a handful of posters. And one box that looked like it had been rescued from a fire. Inside were four memory orbs. One caught my eye. It was labeled: Pinkie Pie's Last Party. I took it, slipping it into my saddlebags and walked to the next room.

The sign over the door announced: Shadowhorn.

The mare in charge of maintenance was a V.I.P. in the Stable? Even in the midst of my barely-reined fury at Stable-Tec, my pure hatred towards whom could not be told, part of my brain recognized that seemed odd.

The door slid open for me and I stepped in. This room was more disheveled. There were parts and scrap metal everywhere. Half-finished projects covered the table. Schematics of different Stable systems were pinned to the wall. One of them had been torn away to reveal this room's safe. Once again, I set to work. When the safe opened, it revealed another recording. This one looked startlingly similar to the one I found in the Overstallion's office.

I needed to hear it. But part of my mind screamed for me not to. I didn't pay attention to that voice. Instead, I played the message, and another familiar voice burst to life in the tomb of Stable Twenty-Nine. The voice sounded determined but weary and filled with sadness. She sounded like she was reading a script that she had grown to hate.

> *"Hello, Shadowhorn! The following is for your ears only. I am speaking to you because you have been selected for a very important job, due to your sense of loyalty and duty both to this company and the ponies around you.*
>
> *"My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me… oh who cares. I'm sick of these things…*

"…try that again…

"Hello, my name is Scootaloo, and I'm the vice-president of Stable-Tec. If you're hearing this, that means that the Omega-Level Threat Protocols have been enacted and the citizens of Equestria chosen for Stable Twenty-Nine have been safely sealed inside the most state-of-the-art apocalypse-survival facility ever created.

"I'm very sorry. I wish there was more we could do.

"Hell, I wish this whole thing could have been prevented…

"…But instead, it falls to us to save who we can, and try to prevent it from happening ever again. To that end, your Stable has been selected to participate in a vital social project. The first goal of Stable Twenty-Nine, like any other, is to save the lives of the ponies inside. But…

"…but there is a higher purpose to your Stable, beyond saving individual ponies. We here at Stable-Tec understand that it doesn't do ponykind any good to save ourselves now only to annihilate each other later. We must figure out where we went wrong. We must find a better way. And we must be ready to implement it as soon as possible once the Stable doors open. And survive what our current leaders have managed to do to Equestria…

"…dammit. How did we come to this? Dammit, dammit, dammit!…

"We… I guess we came to this… maybe… because we're ponies. We try our best. We have the best intentions. But when things go wrong, we get flustered or confused. Or upset. Or angry. Our ability to make smart decisions is impaired the most when we need it the most.

"Bad decisions, emotional decisions… they've dragged us into a war nopony wanted. They've pushed us to the brink of extinction… and if you're listening to this…

"…beyond.

"…dammit all to hell. Damn us all to hell.

"…

"Sorry. I hate this whole thing. I wish the world was the way it was back when I was a filly. But wishes are just wishes.

"…dammit, I can't seem to get through one of these without going wildly off-track. I'm sure you're wondering what, if anything, does this have to do with you? Why am I telling you this? Don't worry, there's actually a point; this isn't just the rantings of some Stable-Tec pony who has… already died… haven't I?

"…

"Your Stable has a very exceptional design. Despite the official documents, this Stable has no remote connection to Stable-Tec whatsoever. Instead, replacing the normal Overmare position, we have fitted Stable Twenty-Nine with a Crusader-class computer system.

"The Crusader-class Maneframe is the most advanced supercomputer ever created by ponykind, using the greatest available improvements in arcano-technology. The Crusader is capable of independent thought, creativity and learning. We've only built three of these, and the other two are currently in the possession of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences and the Ministry of Awesome respectively.

"The goal of this social experiment it to remove the emotional, fallible pony from

> *the equation. To see if we can do better through a pragmatic and logical system of government that is not subject to our own faults.*
>
> *"As always, just in case something goes wrong, there is a backup. And that backup is you. Provided with this recording are the codes to shut down the Crusader Maneframe in case of emergency. Doing so will unfortunately also shut down all the automated systems, so this should only be done in a matter of life and death for the general population of the Stable. There is an access junction between the Security station and the V.I.P. rooms through which you can access the Crusader Maneframe.*
>
> *"As a last resort, the programming of the Crusader Maneframe can also be entirely overwritten via magically transfer-mapping the brain of a pony into the Maneframe itself. This would allow you to effectively become the Crusader, taking control of the automated systems yourself. However, this is untested and the effects on the pony initiating this transfer are unknown, so I really, really don't suggest it.*
>
> *"In any other circumstances, however, it is crucial that you keep to the ruse, as per the directives provided.*
>
> *"Thank you. From all of us. From all of Equestria. Best of luck, and may Stable Twenty-Nine and all its ponies live long and well."*

* * *

Finding the security access junction was easy. I was replaying the message again, this time in my earbloom. It made no sense. But it had the singular benefit of not being overwhelmingly evil. I had to know more.

Pulling away the security panel, I found a maze of tubes and wiring. And set into it, a small yellow-orange box with a black jackpoint. It struck me that the last pony to try this was effectively electrocuted. Hooking my own PipBuck into the junction could be a death sentence. Fortunately, I had another option.

I pulled out Velvet Remedy's PipBuck for the first time since shortly after I found her. It was a thing of beauty, but I realized it had a less pleasant meaning to her. Holding it by levitation only, I jacked her custom PipBuck into the junction.

Minutes later, I was looking though streams of data. One string caught my eye:

```
Error Detected:
Water Talisman functioning at 98% capacity
Analyzing Damage
Chance of restoring Water Talisman to full functionality: 0%
Analyzing Options
Surface Radiation level 1300% above survivable level
Preservation of Pony Life requires water rationing and 0.02%
 reduction of Stable population
Initiating water rationing
Analyzing population for most expendable 0.02%
Initiating population reduction
```

The strength went out of me. I stared at what I was reading, my rage melting into cold despair. There were many more strings of similar data. Over the course of a season, the damaged water talisman continued to deteriorate, and every time the degradation reached a new threshold, the Crusader running Stable Twenty-Nine culled a portion of the population in a coldly calculated attempt to preserve "Pony Life" in the Stable as a whole.

After three months, the water talisman failed altogether. The Crusader acted accordingly. To preserve Pony Life.

I poured what was left of a bottle of apple whiskey down my throat, enjoying the burn. The rage had drained from me, replaced by a numbness that was even worse.

I decided to escape this horrible place through the memory orb, at least for a little while. Setting it down gently, I focused my magic on the orb.

Instantly, I was overwhelmed by bright flashes, a horrible thudding roar and gut-wrenching nausea. The memory orb had decayed somehow, and I was trapped inside a nightmare of sensory feedback and vertigo. I tried to escape, but there was no way out.

Then the world righted itself. But it wasn't my world. I was quite certain I had vomited all over myself, but I wasn't myself, so I couldn't tell.

* * *

All around me spanned a massive party. Colored lights, festive decoration, and a dance beat that grasped hold of your soul and made you want to move. I was at the turntables, bobbing my head to the beat. And everywhere, ponies. Ponies dancing, ponies eating, ponies doing things in corners and behind potted plants that would make their parents blush and faint.

A gracefully aging, light blue pegasus pony with rainbow-colored hair fluttered towards the turntables with a slight swagger and looking a bit sloshed.

"Awesome beat, Vinyl Scratch!" she grinned, "Your rhythms always makes for the best parties!" She wore her years well, and must have been a damn cutie in her youth. I wanted her hair!

And, whoa, was Vinyl Scratch checking her out? She had my gaze going up and down… No, wait, that's just headbobbing.

"Yeah," said a familiar looking orange pony with a cowpony hat on her yellow mane, and red ribbons in her tail that matched her three-apple cutie mark. She was significantly older than her statuette portrayed; she looked even older than in the news article, and had not aged quite so gracefully. I wondered if her looks were more from stress than years. "Fluttershy an' Rarity are gonna be hatin' they missed this."

Her accent reminded me a lot of Calamity.

The orange earth pony sauntered up to the turntables, looking at the blue pegasus who swayed slightly as she smiled back. "Are ya safe t' fly home, Rainbow?"

"Aw hell no!" the rainbow-maned pegasus clopped the orange one on the shoulder. "I haven't left one of Pinkie Pie's parties safe to fly in… nearly twenty years now!"

The orange pony gave her an odd look. "Ya ain't tried any of the… harder stuff… 'ave you?"

"Hell no," Rainbow stomped a hoof as she repeated herself. "You know…" She dropped her voice, which had been getting loud, "…I don't touch any of that stuff." She held a hoof to her breast with slightly wobbly pride. "Rainbow Dash doesn't need enhancements!"

The orange pony looked relieved. I realized I was looking at the mysterious mare of the Ministry of Awesome, the one whose rebellion gave Calamity his title of Dashite. I didn't know what to think; although I had to admit, she certainly had the right hair.

"I heard they've got stuff back there called *dash!"* Rainbow Dash said conspiratorially. "Which Pinkie says would make me even *faster.*" She landed with a heroic stance, her voice filling with extra bravado. "Of course I don't do that stuff, AJ. Dash on dash? That wouldn't just break the laws of Equestria. That would break the laws of *physics!"*

An apple-green coated stallion trotted up and whispered something in the ear of the orange pony (apparently named AJ). Rainbow Dash stopped with a stare. "Sooooo AJ, who's the new buck?"

"Ya don't have t' ask it like that," AJ bristled.

"Aw, if you wanted some company," Rainbow Dash clopped the orange pony on her cutie mark, "You could have just asked me."

The earth pony fixed Rainbow Dash with a look. "My barn door don't swing that way." Something stirred in me. "An' neither does yours." The stirring died. "Yer drunk," the orange pony added unnecessarily but accurately, stepping out of the way of a green mare whose plate was loaded with cakes.

Rainbow Dash just giggled. "So, are you gonna introduce your new buckfriend or not?"

AJ rolled her eyes before introducing him. "This here's Sergeant 'SteelHooves' Applesnack. Served with Big Macintosh. Apples, dear, this is Rainbow Dash, the old friend Ah war… told ya about."

No way.

"No way!" Rainbow Dash echoed my thoughts. Then proceeded to derail them. "You're dating a buck named Apple*snack?"* The pegasus, who had just begun to fly again, collapsed onto the floor, rolling in laughter.

The elderly orange earth pony rolled her eyes. Not looking at her laughing companion, she nickered, "Don't hurt yerself." Somewhere else in the room, an argument had broken out.

"Apple*jack* and Apple*snack!"* Rainbow Dash tried to get up again, but broke down in a fresh wave of laughter. "Oh it hurts too much!"

I was thinking that his title had to be a coincidence. I'd know for sure from his voice, but so far he hadn't said anything. He was watching his date's old friend with a gracious wry amusement.

My sight was torn away from the two as Vinyl Scratch looked up to the balcony, where the argument I'd barely noticed earlier was beginning to draw everypony's attention. I immediately recognized Pinkie Pie, although the purple unicorn who was trotting determinedly away from her was not familiar.

"Not this again," said Pinkie Pie, bouncing after her. "You wouldn't expect me to bake a cupcake without tasting it to make sure it's goooood would you?"

"I'm leaving," she said. "I shouldn't have come." She was barely audible through the clamor of the party.

Pinkie Pie's voice however could somehow be heard clearly over the intense rock music. "Oh, don't be like that, Twilight! It's a *paaaar-teee!* Have *fun!*"

The unicorn glared forward, ignoring her until the surprisingly bouncy pony dropped herself right in front of the purple unicorn. "Have fun! Have fun! Have fun! Have fun!" She sang it like a mantra.

The unicorn stopped, one forehoof off the ground, and stared. She seemed to struggle with an inner urge. For a moment, events could have gone either way. But then she stomped the hoof down.

"I'm *not* having fun, Pinkie Pie," she said, her voice dangerous and loud. "And do you want to know a secret? Neither. Are. *You!*"

Pinkie Pie giggled. "Of course I'm having fun! There's cake and ice cream and cupcakes and the best party music and drinks and party favors and…"

"And these?" The unicorn floated a tin off a nearby table. I knew immediately what they were.

"Yep! Especially those!" The pink pony was nearly beaming. I heard Applejack groan next to me.

Twilight opened the tin. Then turned it over, spilling Party-Time Mint-als all over the floor. Some bounced over the side of the balcony, some down the stairs. The pink pony gasped and jumped for them, scooping them up. Part of me wanted to join her, but I was just along for the ride.

"I'm sick of lying for you," Twilight scolded loudly. "For covering for you with the Princess. Everypony is. And I'm not going to do it anymore."

Pinkie looked up with a glare as she picked up her Party-Time Mint-als. "You didn't have to do that, you witchy-twitchy-rhymes-with-itchy."

"You're not a party pony anymore, Pinkie; you're just an addict. Like half the ponies at your parties." The purple unicorn stared at the pink pony, unleashing a level of mad that had clearly been building up for some time. "Well this is it. I want my old friend back. I want *my* Pinkie Pie. *You* are not *her.* But if you should happen to find her, have her give me a call."

The song ended. The beat stopped. The whole room fell into silence.

"Twi…"

"No, don't 'Twi' me. It won't work this time. Either *clean* up and *fess* up…" The unicorn took a deep breath clinching her own eyes against what she was about to say.

"…or this friendship is over!"

Twilight turned and walked away. The pink pony seemed to deflate. Even her hair fell limp.

Beside me, Applejack moaned again. "Oh gosh, Twi."

Rainbow Dash, who had long stopped laughing, flapped her wings. "She's kinda right." And then the blue pegasus slowly flew towards the exit. She still beat Twilight out the door.

Twilight turned back, looking not quite at Pinkie Pie. In a voice I'm not sure reached the balcony, she said, "If you decide to be my Pinkie Pie again… really do… and need help, you know where to call." Then she walked out the door into what looked like a rainy Manehattan night. It swung shut behind her.

One thought hit me as I collapsed from the memory like I had been kicked in the stomach. (I had, in fact, vomited on myself.)

Leaning against the wall, I assured myself, “I’m not that bad…”

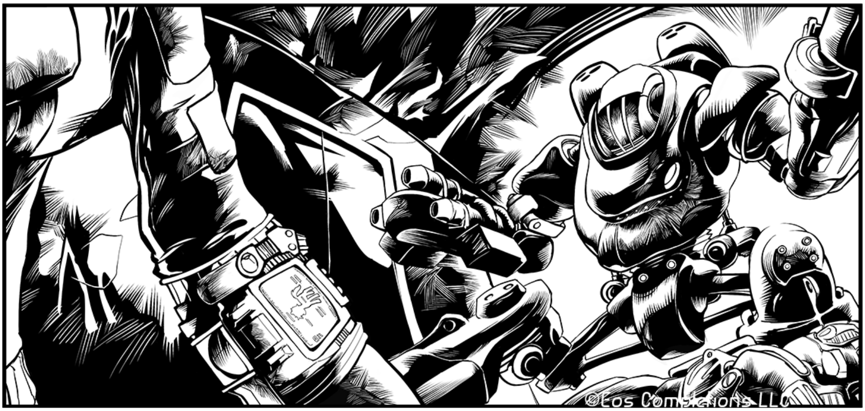
“But I have to be careful with you,” I said to the Party-Time Mint-als in my saddlebags. “I can’t let Calamity or Velvet Remedy get to thinking I have a problem with you. I don’t want to lose my friends because *they* think I’m addicted.”

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Tough Hide (level one) – The brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have hardened you. You gain +3 to Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

Chapter Fifteen

Whispers in the Darkness



"Psst! Pinkie Pie, are you asleep yet?"

Rest.

Sleep came in fits and starts. I seriously, desperately needed rest, but every time I closed my eyes, fevered dreams of wasteland horrors dashed themselves against my mind's eye.

I saw ponies loading into a passenger (*Sky Bandit Stages*) wagon. In my mind, they were families on their way to a day of laughter and fun at a Ministry of Morale amusement park – parents smiling warmly as their colts and fillies pranced in place with anticipation. (I don't know why, but I was certain that MoM had built amusement parks, and that they had been regularly packed full of screaming kids.) I saw mothers urging their colts not to climb on the seats, fathers checking to make sure their cameras had film. And a great wall of green flame with a sinister rainbow sheen rushing towards them that somehow nopony could see.

I saw a pony named Trixie leaving a message on the door to her cottage, grinning as she assured herself that her whole life was about to change. I saw her walking away from that door (which in the dream I had somehow become) even as I called out to her to come back, knowing that if she left, she would never live to see her little cottage again. I called, pleaded, cried. But she could not hear me and walked away.

I saw ponies giving their loved ones the great news that they had been selected for a Stable. I watched as they – bright and colorful and living ponies – trotted into their new home, the clock on the wall above them counting down the minutes until an accident would doom them all to horror and death.

I awoke with a fit.

I was laying… somewhere. A bed. But every time I tried to remember exactly where I was, or how I got there, the memories slipped away. I opened my eyes. The room was dark, but light poured in through a cracked-open door. I didn't recognize the walls with their shadowed posters or the roof with its still and silent turret.

My body felt wrong. I ached, I felt horribly weak. I had chills when I wasn't sweating profusely. My stomach churned. My mouth tasted strange and mushy.

Shadows trotted near the door. I heard Calamity's voice. "Do ya think she went an' picked up somethin' in the Stable?"

Velvet Remedy's voice, soft and clear, responded, "Or it could be brought on by stress. I'm worried about her. I think the wasteland is getting to her."

"Y'all seem t' be doin' well," Calamity observed, his voice low so as not to wake me.

Velvet gave a wry (yet very feminine) laugh. "Not as well as you think, my noble outsider." Was that sarcasm? Or affection? I couldn't tell, and trying to think about it made my thoughts swim. "And I *should* do better than Littlepip; I'm over a decade more mature than she is."

Great. I'm a child to her. Beautiful. I'm a fucking filly. The same filly as the first time we met at some older filly's Cute-ceañera. My life just couldn't get any better.

"And all those drugs she's been taking… they're certainly not helping."

My stomach convulsed violently. I wanted to cry. My eyelids were too heavy to look around anymore, and I didn't fight them as they closed on their own. I turned away from the slice of light coming through the door, falling again into fitful sleep.

* * *

"Are ya gonna stay in here with 'er all night?"

Calamity's voice was a whisper, very close to my bed. I wasn't entirely sure that I was awake, much less at which point the tides of dreaming had deposited me on the shore of awareness. I vaguely recalled a change in the darkness, a fluctuation of light, perhaps the opening of a door.

"At least until her fever breaks," the whisper of Velvet Remedy's voice sounded from near my head. My ears twitched.

"She awake?"

"She's been in and out. She'll sleep better once the fever's broken."

Wonderful. My body felt alien to me. My mind was a horrible, shifting haze. I said a silent prayer to Celestia, begging her to take my sickness from me and cast it to the moon.

"Ah'm more worried about you," Calamity said. "And not just 'cause ya need t' sleep too."

Celestia, do you hate me? My sickness and misery was giving them time to *bond.* My mind started tormenting me with images of how they might be spending their time together now that I was effectively out of the picture.

"Oh?" My fevered brain insisted that she sounded pleased as well as oddly condescending.

"Yer shield spell ain't anywhere near as strong as them…" Calamity paused. "… Alicorns, Ah guess we're callin' 'em now." Was that disgust in Calamity's voice? No, not disgust. But something else. Something unpleasant, as if the word didn't taste good.

"Your point?"

"If ya gonna be makin' a habit o' usin' yer body t' shield other ponies, ya need t' start wearin' armor," Calamity insisted. Yay Calamity. I was going to tell her that too. Just… never quite had the chance…

My head was feeling heavy. Just listening seemed to take effort. My body was too hot, the blanket drenched in sweat, but my limbs were too heavy to move. Sleep was creeping up on me like a manticore ready to pounce, wanting to drag me off into nightmares again.

"…won't get me into anything worn by one of those nasty raiders," Velvet was saying. I realized I'd missed part of the conversation.

"Wouldn't want ya to. Slaver armor neither. Bad idea. Ask Li'lpip when she's up an about," Calamity whispered firmly. "But when we get t' Tenpony, we gonna buy ya some proper duds fer the Equestrian Wasteland."

My despondency evaporated at those words. A strange sense of relief, twisted by illness, washed over me. Part of me, I realized, had been afraid that they would leave me.

I felt doomed to wander until either I found my place in this hellish outside, or… or I fixed it. At least, as much as I could. I supposed I was searching for my virtue, as Watcher had suggested, like a filly trying to invoke her cutie mark. But Calamity and Velvet Remedy were not burdened by my quest, or my sense of being utterly lost. Why wouldn't they leave me to it on my own once they had found some place to stay? Tenpony Tower, for instance. Why *shouldn't* they?

To hear them speaking of getting Velvet Remedy armor (something I firmly agreed with Calamity that she needed, even though I couldn't picture my elegant idol wearing anything other than classy dresses) – to know they were planning for a future wandering the Equestrian Wasteland, presumably with me – filled my heart with assurance and hope.

But despite the warmth of these feelings, as I drifted back to sleep, my mind began to venture again down dark paths. I found myself wondering what, if anything, could have been done to save all the ponies of Stable Twenty-Nine. With exposure to the surface fatal and their water talisman dying, all I could see was hundreds of ponies trapped in a sarcophagus under the ground. Already buried, waiting to die.

They did not, my mind insisted, need to die with such violence and horror. But the only way I could think of to save even one of them…

No, that would have been too abhorrent to consider.

…the only way to save even one would have been to make sure the strain on the water talisman was so minimal that its deterioration would have taken several decades. Something that could only have been done if, instead of initially reducing the population by that minimal 0.02%…

I cringed away from myself, revolted that I could even think such a thing.

I awoke again hours later with a silent gasp, drenched and chilled with a cold that sank into my soul. My sense of what I had been dreaming collapsed into a dark pit that was swiftly sealed by wakefulness. Only a few shreds of memory remained; I was fairly certain it had something to do with the Ponyville Library, dead cats and being burned alive by a dragon.

I found a canteen had been hung by the side of the bed. I drank greedily from it and then fell back into the horrors of sleep.

"No! Don't go! I'm trapped!"

I cried out, my hind legs crushed under a fallen wall, but Velvet Remedy and Calamity just walked away.

"Please… Don't leave me here!"

Velvet Remedy leaned her head against Calamity's mane and nuzzled. The ground was stretching between us. They were barely walking, but they were getting further away. The clouds were boiling down, becoming fog, surrounding and obscuring them as my heart threatened to seize. I knew that when they disappeared, I would die…

I awoke crying and beat a hoof against my pillow.

Despair tainted my hope, like a cupcake with ashes mixed into the batter. They were staying with me, but I was losing them to each other.

My ears perked. There were no voices. *Oh Luna… I was alone! They'd left me!* I still felt trapped. My head jerked up, looking around frantically. Grey daylight seeping between heavy curtains (were they armored mesh?) raised the ambient illumination in the room. Something heavy pressed against my side. Turning, I found Velvet Remedy asleep, her head having fallen onto the bed beside me, pinning me under the blankets.

Relief was like a flood of painkiller, numbing the irrational fears of my night terrors which clung to me like leeches. I was happy for Velvet and Calamity. No, I really was! I was just… lonely.

Lonely, and…

Frustrated.

I looked away from Velvet and found myself staring at a huge wall poster, garishly pink, advertising the Fillydelphia Funfarm Amusement Park. ("Everything the Grand Galloping Gala should have been," endorses Pinkie Pie, "Every day, forever!") Well, now I knew where that notion had come from.

On the opposite wall was another copy of the recruitment poster. ("You too can be a Steel Ranger!") I realized where I must be. Lifting my PipBuck, I checked the automap. SteelHooves Shack. I collapsed back onto the bed, feeling unbearably exhausted, physically and mentally.

And, even worse, I felt horny. Which was not a sensation that mixed well with illness. Maybe it was having Velvet Remedy so close, her head pressing against my flank as she slept partially on my bed. My stomach twisted in warning. I didn't care.

I was too hot, too sick. But still, as I lay back, I tried to summon up daydreams that would relieve at least one of my symptoms, my hooves beneath my blankets. I turned to face away from Velvet Remedy in shame.

I contemplated Candi, but her face and features were already faded in my mind (and the ending of my relationship with New Appleloosa would sour any fantasy). I considered the rainbow-maned mare from the memory orb. But no matter how well she had aged, she was still older than I wanted to fantasize about. And even if I pictured her younger, the link between her and Calamity would just make it… weird. Finally, I settled on daydreaming about the mare from one of my statuettes, the breathtakingly alluring white unicorn pony with her dreamy purple mane and tail.

I enjoyed that as much as my sickness-addled body would allow… for maybe half an hour. Then, like a splash of cold water, I realized the mare I was fantasizing about was Velvet Remedy's great, great, something-or-other grand-aunt. That murdered my fantasy, and danced cruelly on its corpse. The weight of Velvet Remedy's head was suddenly more present than before. I could feel the warmth radiating from her, and my stomach knotted with guilt.

Suddenly, I felt a heaving inside me, and the taste of bile. Pushing to the edge of the bed, I vomited into the crevasse between the bed and the wall.

Still retching, my mouth foul and burning, my eyes shedding tears, I heard Velvet Remedy stir awake. My fall was complete. Now, instead of being a child in her eyes, I'd be vomitpony. I had no chance of stealing her away from Calamity now… not that I ever did. (Or ever would! I'm not that kind of jealous, selfish pony. But… just saying… if I was that kind of pony, this would be the final nail in the coffin of any chance I had.) I felt Velvet's weight lift from the bed as she pulled back from me.

"Oh… Littlepip, are you okay?" What a stupid question. Yet I nodded, my head pressed against the wall. "Let me get you some water…"

I waited for her to go, crying just a little against the wall, my coat matted in sweat, my head burning against the wall.

"Goddess, I'm pathetic."

Velvet Remedy returned to give me water, to clean the wall and floor of my vomit, to bathe me and replace the sheets on my bed. I was in no state to enjoy any of it. But I could properly marvel that she took the time on somepony like me.

⁂

My fever finally broke sometime that evening, and I finally slipped into a restorative, dreamless sleep.

I awoke feeling like I hadn't felt in days: sane.

My body was weak but not feeble, and I was warm and thankfully rested. My mouth tasted pasty, but my stomach was settled. And I found I was quite thirsty.

I rolled over in the bed, wondering how long I had been half-delirious, and spotted Velvet Remedy curled up on the floor fast asleep. My heart went out to her, recognizing how much I owed the older unicorn. Her head rested on an old jacket, and somepony had pulled a blanket over her while she slept. I was sure it was Calamity, and I was pleased.

As I floated the canteen from the bedpost, the deep, resonating voice of SteelHooves carried in from the other room. "Sorry, but I just don't buy it."

"Ah don't get ya," I heard Calamity respond. There was something in the tone of both ponies that caught my attention. My ears perked, and I drank quietly as I listened.

"Your group is like the beginning of a bad joke," SteelHooves elaborated. "A covert agent, a princess descended from pre-war aristocracy and an outcast from an advanced civilization trot into a saloon and try to tell ponies that they're completely normal."

I nearly choked. Swiftly and without a sound, I plugged the canteen and rehung it on the bed.

"Y'think we're lyin'?" Thank you, Calamity, for sounding offended.

"I think either you're lying to me, or they're lying to you."

I heard a stomp I assumed was from Calamity. "What makes ya think…?"

"Because I was conscious, if barely. I saw all of us down for the count. That alicorn was at full strength, unimpaired, her magical shield shrugging off grenades. Then, a moment later, she was dead," the low voice gave a grave accounting of our meeting battle like a schoolteacher reading test scores. "A single bullet hole, right through the brain. You want me to believe some innocent young mare just weeks out of a Stable did that? Do *you* even believe that?"

I didn't like how quiet Calamity was before saying, "Yeah, Ah do. Cuz that's what happened."

"An innocent young mare," SteelHooves repeated, "Just out of a Stable. With refined criminal skills that let her pick every lock and hack every computer, even when nopony else in two hundred years has managed the feat."

I frowned. I had to admit, I'd wondered about the lack of other skilled lockpickers myself. But then, I also knew that I had honed my skill in precise telekinetic lockpicking over years as part of my attempt to conjure my cutie mark. My C.A.T. proved that my natural talents were focused towards mundane and arcane sciences, and my studies as a PipBuck technician and the tools of my trade gave me the education to manipulate terminals that few outsiders would have. But most of all, I knew that I hadn't been anywhere near as good at either of these things when I left Stable Two as I had become since. I had been reading books and getting a *lot* of practice.

SteelHooves continued, "For that matter, a Stable that is still in closed operation? It's hard enough to find a Stable whose population survived." A dark cloud threatened my mind at that.

Calamity's voice was low, and perhaps a little dangerous. "Are ya suggestin' they ain't from a Stable?"

"No. I'm sure they're from a Stable." The voice was cool and even. "I just find it more believable that they are highly-trained agents on a mission… perhaps from someplace akin to a Ministry of Awesome black-ops facility… than wide-eyed tourists from a repository for civilian ponies."

What? I thought Calamity said the Ministry of Awesome didn't actually do anything.

Calamity nickered. "That's… ridiculous."

"Really?" SteelHooves asked. "She survived a train jumping off a cliff."

"Ah caught her!"

SteelHooves paused, and seemed to concede that one. "How did you meet her?"

My friend hesitated. Then, with a sad breath, "I nearly killed her."

"She'd jus' come outta Ponyville, where she'd cleared a nest o' raiders," Calamity explained. "She was covered in blood an' wearin' armor she'd scavenged from 'em, so I mistook her for a raider 'erself. Swooped outta the sky an' started shootin'." I could hear the regret in his voice.

I felt a pang in my heart for him. But I also winced at his description. Even Calamity seemed to do a double-take at how that sounded, because after a pause, he quickly followed with, "They were raiders, mind ya. Raiders ain't that hard t' kill." Then, seeming to remember the wagon crash, he amended, "If yer at least a li'l lucky. An' the terrain is on yer side."

"I see," SteelHooves deadpanned. "So she's not a secret agent death pony. She's just lucky. How about the other one?"

"Velvet Remedy? She's…" Calamity chuckled, "She's a civilian. She's a medic an' a singer. How does *that* fit inta yer covert ops stable theory?"

"Any other talents?"

"Does being the most beautiful pony I've ever met count?" I could hear the smile in Calamity's voice. "Other than that, no. I mean, well… she does have a freakish knack fer getting' what she want. Barterin' Ah mean. An' talkin' folks inta stuff, when she's not bein'…" Calamity shut up.

Good buck, Calamity. Don't finish that sentence.

"A direct descendant of one of the three founders of Stable-Tec. The founder who, I believe, was Stable-Tec's face of public relations and also the sister of one of the eight most powerful figures in the pre-apocalyptic government. A descendant with skills in seduction, trade and diplomacy." SteelHooves intoned wryly, "No, you're right. That does sound like a civilian pony."

I groaned inside. How the hell did SteelHooves manage to do that? *I* was beginning to doubt my story, and I'd *lived* it.

I heard Calamity sigh. I hoped it was out of exasperation. "Okay, let's pretend, just fer a minute, that my companions 'ave been lyin' t' me through their teeth." Oh no. Calamity, please don't. We've been honest. I know it sounds bad when he says it like that, but…

Calamity finished, "T' what end?"

"Well," the deep, masculine voice rumbled, "They marched into the center of a battle between raiders and slavers, somehow got the heads of two factions to sit down in the short one's crosshairs, and then proceeded not only to eliminate the one they didn't like, but to kill the dragon running the show, assuring the one they wanted was in charge…"

Calamity interrupted, "Ah dare say ah had a might t' do with that muhself."

SteelHooves continued, undissuaded. "To me, that sounds a lot like a special unit rearranging local power structures to suit their purposes. Whatever those purposed might be."

Goddesses damn it. Is this what ponies were thinking? And I had been chagrined by my reputation when I was supposedly just a hero. This was… insane.

At least Calamity seemed to agree with me on that. "Riiiiight. Okay then, how about this? If Li'lpip was some sorta special black ops pony, how in tarnation could Ah 'ave nearly killed 'er?"

"Because underground training facilities aren't exactly the best place to learn to fight aerial opponents. I doubt you'd be able to get the drop on her again."

Calamity was fighting not to fall for it too, bless him. "Look, Ah've been with them. Y'all haven't. Ah know they're… surprisin'. But if ya got t'know 'em…"

"I'd see that they're not spies at all?" SteelHooves' deep voice seemed on the verge of a chuckle.

"Ayep." Thank you, Calamity.

"Not a sly, sneaky hair in their manes, then?"

"Not a one."

"Did you know that when Littlepip sleeps, she has a cute little snore?"

I do not sn… oh *crap!*

"Come again?"

I was just finishing dressing myself, and was levitating my saddlebags into place when the pony in magically powered armor had stepped in and made his announcement.

"I will be accompanying you to Tenpony Tower. After risking yourselves to save my life, escorting you safely to your destination is the least I can do."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

SteelHooves, however, put his hooves down. "I insist."

I frowned, looking about the room while I thought. The shack had three rooms, the bedroom, the main room, and a workroom in the back. Upon seeing the whole of it, I realized that SteelHooves had given me his own bed to sleep upon, and that everypony had slept on the floors save for me. It made me feel grateful and guilty.

This was not the bedroom I had spent the last several days sick in, but the main room of the shack, featuring a dinner table, rows of metal lockers, a desk with a glowing terminal, and a few scattered trophies as decorations. Above the desk was a banner: a half-apple with an inlay of three magical sparks ringed by gears, held by crescent-shaped wings and overlaid by a sword of war with a mouth-brace hilt. It was the same emblem that adorned the flank of SteelHooves battle armor, right where his cutie mark would be hidden beneath.

The Steel Rangers.

I sighed. "You'll have to ask the others," I said, cinching my saddlebags tight. I started to strap on the holsters and slings for my weapons.

"I already spoke with them on this. They claimed you're their leader."

What? Why? I was really the least qualified to be in charge. Because the radio kept saying so? I added that to the list of things to talk to DJ Pon3 about when we arrive to Tenpony Tower.

I looked over to Velvet Remedy, but she was laying on the floor, her mind lost in the Fluttershy memory orb.

In the back room, I could hear Calamity working on the weapons he had procured from Stable Twenty-Nine's armory. Our pockets were now filled with common, low-caliber ammo that fit none of the weapons we preferred to use, and Calamity was swapping parts and doing repairs on small pistols and low-powered rifles meant to use those bullets. Not that we expected to use them – only the armory's supply of shotgun shells was likely to be of service to us – but both weapons and ammo would be valuable trade goods.

A radio in the back room played DJ Pon3's radio station. The sounds of a quartet of ponies gave way to a melody of sorrow, fear and hope and the vocals of a pleasant-sounding buck who was two hundred years dead.

"I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.
How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?
When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding
And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

Strapping my sniper rifle into place, I finally looked to SteelHooves. But my answer faded when I saw he was looking away, his gaze focused on a small picture in the corner of the room that I hadn't noticed before. The picture of an elder orange mare, her yellow mane salted with grey under her cowpony hat. He swayed slightly. I felt a gravity in the room that told me not to speak.

I did move forward for a closer look, but I already knew I had seen this mare before. Many times. Her statuette was in my saddlebags, as was the memory of her at what had been Pinkie Pie's last party. I was certain now that the memory of SteelHooves was in that orb too.

Beneath the picture was a display safe. Inside, perfectly preserved, was yet another statuette of the bucking orange pony ("Be Strong") in the glory of her youth. On top of the case was a small, silk-lined box, much like the one I had found in Vinyl Scratch's safe, within which sat a single memory orb.

SteelHooves only stirred again when the song ended, the last refrain echoing into nothingness.

"You knew her, didn't you?" I asked softly, gently.

SteelHooves turned towards me. "How could I have? She died two centuries ago."

I gazed at him, not judging, just knowing. He stood rigid against the gaze for several minutes, until finally I looked away.

DJ Pon3's voice erupted from the back room.

> *"Got your ears up, faithful listeners? Cuz I've been talkin' and some of you ain't been listenin'. For years now, I've been reminding you that ghouls and zombies ain't the same thing. Ghouls are ponies who have had the misfortune of soaking up a major dose of magical radiation and not dying. That stuff twists and rots their bodies, but unlike zombies, their minds are still like those of any other pony, and they deserve t' be treated as such.*
>
> *"Well, some of you ponies up in Tenpony Tower didn't get the message. And when Sheriff Rottingtail kept pressin' for him and his ghouls t' be allowed inside, just cuz they were sick of being hounded by manticores an' slaughtered by bloodwings, Chief Grim Star, the head of Tenpony security, responded by hiring a bunch of mercenaries to scour the tenements along the Celestia Line and wipe them all out.*
>
> *"In an interview, when asked how he had managed to be such a supreme douche bag, Chief Grim Star had this to say:"*

Another voice, gruff and irritated, came through the radio's speakers.

> *"Fuck off. I did what was right by those I swore to protect."*

DJ Pon3's voice returned.

> *"Just warms the heart to know that there are ponies steadfastly defending prejudice and bigotry, doesn't it? Thank you, Chief Grim Star and may Celestia bless you with a kiss from the sun."*

The last certainly sounded like it was said through gritted teeth.

I shook my head. On the one hoof, I actually felt relief to hear a news report that wasn't about me. But on the other, I had experience with both ghoul-ponies like Ditzy Doo and actual zombie-ponies. I knew the difference. And the idea of somepony endorsing wholesale slaughter of innocent ghouls because they couldn't be bothered to discern between them made me hurt and tinged my vision with red.

The deep, masculine voice of Steelhooves nickered from within his metal helmet. "Not a fan of ghoul-supporters, I take it?"

I looked at him in confusion that bordered on several darker emotions. My disgust had clearly been evident in either my face or body language; it hadn't occurred to me that my reaction could be easily misread as directed towards DJ Pon3 himself.

"One of the wisest, kindest ponies I've met in this blasted hellscape is a ghoul-pony!" I spat at him. "Her name is Ditzy Doo, and she's easily worth any three Steel Rangers put together. Not for fighting skills or fancy weapons, but for the quality of her character." I stomped a forehoof hard enough to sprain it. "DJ Pon3 is right. And if you don't get that, then you have no place traveling with us."

SteelHooves said nothing. But began to pack.

⁂

I gazed at the leftover parts strewn across the workbench in Calamity's wake. Now that I had all the parts to build my poisoned dart gun, I should use this opportunity to put it together. Invoking my single magical ability, I started to clear away a space while simultaneously pulling the schematics out of my saddlebags.

"Mornin', Li'lpip." Calamity trotted into the room. "Good t'see ya back on yer hooves."

I smiled a little thinly, giving him a nod. The conversation from the night before still cast its shadow in my mind. I knew what Calamity and the Steel Ranger had talked about, and just how convincingly SteelHooves had woven doubts. Calamity knew I'd been eavesdropping. But neither of us had said anything.

"Looks like we got ourselves a new travelin' companion. Least fer a li'l while," Calamity said conversationally. "Whatcha think of 'im?"

I shrugged. I still wasn't sure what to make of the Steel Ranger. I'd seen the shadows of both good and bad in him, but it was too soon to do anything more than to hop, skip and jump to conclusions.

From Calamity's cautious tone, I could tell he was having doubts about SteelHooves. "Ah'll admit, we could use the firepower," he offered graciously. "Be damned useful havin' an explosive ordnance specialist like that in the saddle if we run inta any more o' them… alicorns."

I nodded, having begun to worry about the next time we encountered those creatures. If my suspicions were right…

"On the other hoof," Calamity started to say, then stopped as if questioning whether his opinion was worth voicing. I turned to look at him and lifted a hoof in a wave for him to go on.

"Well, let's jus' say that the Steel Rangers ain't exactly got a reputation as champions o' the common pony."

Ah yes. Reputations. The night's conversation loomed in my mind again. My eyes looked over Calamity, taking in the distance between us. I wondered if the gap was more than just physical. My memories pulled back the sheet on an almost-forgotten dream of being trapped under a wall and watching my friends just walk away.

"Hey, Li'lpip, are you okay?" Clearly, I bore my worries like a cutie mark. I snorted at the dark humor of it: some secret spy I'd be.

Calamity clopped up next to me and put a hoof gently over my back. "Now don't ya worry. Nothin' said by that lot is gonna sow seeds o' distrust 'tween us."

I looked up at him, wide-eyed. He smiled at me. "Ah've seen yer heart, Li'lpip. Y'all genuinely want t' help folk, an' ya put yer own life at risk t' do so, even when some of 'em don't deserve it. I ain't gonna start questionin' what I know 'bout ya just cuz somepony who don't know what he's yappin' 'bout can get it twisted all up."

I could feel tears gathering in my eyes. I tossed my forelegs around the big, rust-colored pony and hugged him for all I was worth.

* * *

"You can look into it if you want."

It was the first thing SteelHooves had said to me since my outburst over an hour ago. Velvet Remedy was in the room looking over our provisions. Calamity was refilling our canteens from SteelHooves' water purifier. I had finished my packing and had been staring aimlessly; my curious gaze had eventually fallen on the memory orb sitting enthroned under the picture of Applejack, mare of the Ministry of…

I realized I didn't really know which Ministry of Luna's government Applejack had been in charge of. I just had enough clues to make a few educated guesses.

"Go ahead," SteelHooves encouraged. "It hasn't been viewed in a long, long time. Somepony else should remember."

I regarded first the Steel Ranger, then the orb. I had to wonder why any pony other than a unicorn would be keeping one, since only unicorns could access the memories stored within. It made no sense, I realized, unless that pony was keeping it so that it could be shared. Or safekeeping it – but even safekeeping it was the just the same as throwing it away if nopony ever witnessed what was kept inside.

I nodded, respectful of what I was being offered. Then leaned forward, pointing my horn towards the sphere and touching it with my magic.

My world fell away.

* * *

I was harnessed to something.

We were standing offstage, concealed in darkness by a heavy curtain. Applejack stood next to me, staring out at the dark stone stage, the podium with microphone and speakers, the mumbling throng filling the auditorium in front of it, the huge brass MWT logo on the wall behind it.

I (or at least the pony whose memory I was riding) only had eyes for her. She looked nervous, not to mention uncomfortable in her formal business dress.

"Ah can't do this."

I felt myself speak, heard the words coming from my mouth, "You'll be fine." The voice was deep and strong, like SteelHooves' but not nearly so gravelly.

"They hate me. Half of 'em already been saddlesore cuz Ah started puttin' all my hooves inta the Ministry 'stead o' jus' lettin' 'em do what they wanted. But bringin' in Twilight's ponies?" From her tone, that had apparently not gone over well at all.

I wrapped a foreleg around her neck (allowing me to glimpse the apple green color of my coat) and nuzzled her gently, a sensation that I found quite pleasant. "And after today, they'll all understand it, and they'll admire you for it."

I (or more precisely, the pony I was "riding") leaned close and whispered into her ear. "Now go on out there and make history. Or I'll be forced to spank you."

Oh goddess Celestia!

The orange pony blushed and gave her encourager a look that I would have paid almost anything to have a mare give me. "Later, loverboy." She smiled, at least more cheerful now, and strode out before the crowd. The pony I was riding watched her stride, his eyes straying repeatedly to her flanks, taking my gaze with his. As much as I couldn't blame him, it was making me feel distinctly uncomfortable. This was an odd memory to be sharing.

Then I noticed that she had a holster strapped to one leg, mostly hidden beneath her formal attire. The ivory handle flashed three red apples as she walked.

The reception was not the respectful and admiring silence which Fluttershy received. But Applejack stood up straight at the podium, cleared her throat, and spoke slowly and clearly.

"Now listen up. Ah know y'all been a bit sore 'bout havin' ponies from the Ministry of Arcane Sciences workin' with us. Ah know y'all are dedicated t' improvin' Equestria the earth pony way, an' magic kinda flies in the face of alla that. But there are some things that're jus' too important t' let stubborn pride get in the way o' askin' for help. Trust me. Ah know.

"An' Ah want y'all t' know how proud Ah am t' be standin' here today, able t' finally show ya the fruits of yer efforts. Most of ya don't know whatcha been workin' on. T'was important t' keep things…" The next word did not seem to come naturally to her, "…compartmentalized t' keep this project outta zebra hooves. What y'all have accomplished in just one year… ain't been a buncha earth ponies do more good work in less time than when we built Appleloosa."

Until this point, her words were undercut by resentful rumbles of whispered opinion. Now, her voice dropped into a tone both somber and deadly serious. The ponies in the audience began to hush. Not for her, but out of reverence for what she spoke of.

"When Ah was young, my big brother, Big Macintosh, was always there fer me. He was muh closest kin, an' he never let me down. And when Equestria needed him, he didn't let us down neither. He served heroically in our army, fighting for our way o' life for three years. And then, when we needed him most, he made the ultimate sacrifice.

"When that zebra bullet punched through muh brother's armor an' pierced his heart, it broke muh heart too." I could see Applejack's eyes start to tear. Her voice trembled, but she pressed on. The room was now dead silent except for her.

"One year ago, we buried muh brother, Big Macintosh. And that day, Ah swore an oath that no one other pony would die needlessly in battle. They're riskin' their lives out there fer us. We owe them better. An' now, startin' today, we give 'em better."

My memory escort started walking onto the stage. I felt the ropes trailing from me lift and pull taut, the harness digging into my flesh. I felt the resistance and heard the wheels of the wagon I was pulling begin to move.

"Ponies of the Ministry o' Technology, Ah give t' y'all the Steel Ranger!"

Moments later, the memory collapsed, the last sight lingering in my mind as my own world reasserted itself: a glance back at the display wagon and the magical power armor it was carrying. I looked to SteelHooves, sensing I now understood him far more than I had moments ago.

* * *

The light grey of the clouds had descended, shrouding the landscape in fog. All around us, the rubble of blast-flattened and age-demolished buildings created shadows and obstacles. I regularly had to check my E.F.S. compass to make sure we were still headed in the right direction. Even Calamity was grounded to avoid losing us.

We were entering the outskirts of Manehattan now. I felt a pang of disappointment that I couldn't properly see the city. Calamity and Velvet Remedy had taken the lead. My frequent attention to my Eyes-Forward Sparkle was as much to spot hostile creatures as to navigate.

Another red spot flared up in front of us and just off to the left. "Calamity, seven o'clock."

Calamity nodded and crouched down, sneaking forward. The fog wrapped about him, concealing him from my vision, but my E.F.S. compass marked his position. Velvet hung back a little, but kept him locked in her sight, her horn glowing faintly as she prepared to throw a shield around the orange-maned pegasus in the black desperado hat.

A moment later, a single twin-shot rang out.

Calamity returned. "Giant radhog." One of the mutated pig-like creatures I had encountered under the train bridge.

"I do hope you're not planning to cook and eat that," Velvet Remedy intoned disparagingly. "I can't imagine all the meat you've been eating did you any good over the last few days."

I shot her a look that she probably couldn't see and said nothing.

"Y'see, now that's why y'all are a vegetarian," Calamity laughed. "Y' ain't never had bacon. Trust me, if ponies were meant t' only eat fruits, oats an' grasses, then the existence of bacon would be the proof in the pie that the world was just cruel and evil."

Oh great. Now I *had* to try eating radhog.

A few moments later, we had a cookfire started and Calamity was explaining to me just which parts of a radhog were the most delicious. Velvet Remedy had chosen to join SteelHooves in ignoring the two of us.

Her silky voice sliced through the air as she told SteelHooves, "Now, if we get into a battle, I do hope you have the good sense to let Calamity and Littlepip handle it. No offense – I really am thankful for your coming to our rescue – but I came closer to dying from all your explosions than from the alicorns."

I hadn't thought of it that way, but Velvet Remedy had a strong point. SteelHooves' weapons were all extremely… excessive. And while that was very good for fighting manticores or alicorns at a good distance, it could be lethal to everypony in close quarters or enclosed spaces.

I'd have to convince SteelHooves to keep himself in reserve until he was needed. I wasn't sure how that would go over with the Steel Ranger. Traveling with others and having to take precautions to keep his own companions alive was not, I suspected, something SteelHooves had been required to deal with for a long time.

* * *

"…old song," Calamity was saying to Velvet Remedy as the two of them took the lead once again. "If Ah sang a little bit o' it (badly, probably) could ya magic up some music t' go with it?"

"Well," Velvet said uncertainly. "I could certainly try." Then, with a reassuring smile, "And your voice is quite good. If you took some singing lessons, you'd be very pleasant to listen to."

I rolled my eyes. That's my Velvet.

No, that's Calamity's Velvet, I reasserted to myself. And then wiped the whole thought clean; Velvet Remedy was Velvet's Velvet, and would be until she said otherwise. And even then, only so long as she allowed it. Calamity was going to be Velvet's Calamity.

And I was not going to be a jealous third wing.

SteelHooves was bringing up the rear. I dropped back, choosing to engage him in discourse rather than dwell on the two ponies in front of me. Trying to strike up conversation, I told him I had a question about the memory I'd seen.

"What question?" His voice suggested there were a great many questions he suspected I might have and that most of them were not really my business.

"The Ministry of Technology – why M.*W.*T.?"

When the unseen pony spoke, I could hear a touch of relief in his voice. "Officially, it was the Ministry of Wartime Technologies. But Applejack hated that name. She was always the first to point out that the technological innovations that M.W.T. championed and subsidized benefited all of Equestria, not just the war effort."

I nodded, listening intently. It was a subject that SteelHooves had some warmth for. But a small flash of green in the sky above us distracted my gaze. I looked up, but saw nothing. I turned to ask SteelHooves if he had seen anything, but he was continuing to speak about Applejack's Ministry; I doubted a skywagon crash would have diverted his attention.

"Under the Ministry's guidance and support, dozens of innovative technology industries blossomed across Equestria, and existing ones became a lot more powerful, their products becoming part of every pony's daily life. Companies like Ironshod, Four Stars, Equestrian Robotics and even Stable-Tec." He turned his helmeted gaze down towards my PipBuck. "So why use a name focused on war? It *should* have been the Ministry of Technology."

I heard music. Not Velvet Remedy or Calamity. Patriotic gala music whispering out of the mist. I stopped, turning in place until the little blip of light appeared on my compass.

"Everypony, please hold up. I want to check something."

"Alone?" SteelHooves questioned.

"Yes," I nodded. "It's okay. I'll be right back."

"She do this a lot?" I heard him ask my companions as I slipped off into the mist, following the sound.

"Do what?" Calamity snickered. "Wander off? Break travel to explore random ruins? All the time."

* * *

I was approaching a building. Half of it was a huge barn with vast shattered windows. The other half loomed castle-like in the mist. My PipBuck flashed a name across my E.F.S.: Four Stars Grand Terminal and Central Offices.

The music cut out with a static-laced pop. "Hello Watcher."

"Hello, Littlepip. I see you've made a new friend."

"Maybe," I said, not committing either way.

As if on cue, SteelHooves' deep voice resonated through the mist. "Littlepip, you okay?" Wow. Stealthy he was not.

"Hey," the mechanical voice of Watcher expressed, "That voice sounds familiar." That didn't surprise me. SteelHooves' voice was very distinctive. And if Watcher had been snooping on the Equestrian Wasteland for any length of time, it may very well have spied on the Steel Rangers.

Watcher: now there was somepony who deserved to be suspected as a covert ops spy pony.

I looked around for the sprite-bot, but the fog concealed it expertly. Instead, I spotted twin vending machines: Sparkle~Cola and Sunrise Sarsaparilla. And a third set just a few yards down from them: Ironshod's Ammo Emporium. The last had been torn open and thoroughly looted. I felt a chill, imagining the kind of pre-war world where you could buy ammo along with your soft drinks at a street-side machine. No pony interaction necessary.

"Watcher, was there a Ministry of Awesome?" It was just a lead-in question; clearly, I already knew.

"Ah yes, Rainbow Dash." The disembodied artificial voice somehow managed to sound amused even though it had no inflection at all. "Yes, one of Equestria's heroes did decide that her Ministry would be the Ministry of Awesome. They even built a Ministry Headquarters for it on Ministry Walk. I assume Calamity mentioned it?"

I nodded. Then, realizing Watcher possibly couldn't see me any better than I could see the sprite-bot (although it would truly surprise me if that was the case), I stated, "Yes."

Ministry Walk. I'd heard of that place before, but I couldn't quite put my hoof on where or when.

After pondering it fruitlessly, I finally asked, "What did the Ministry of Awesome do?" I hated (loathed) questioning something Calamity had told me, especially based on something SteelHooves had said. Even more so after Calamity had not done the same.

"Not much," Watcher said to my great sense of relief. "I mean, Rainbow Dash did throw two or three projects their way – the Single Pony Project was one of theirs, for example – but for the most part, they just lounged around and did nothing. After a few years, Luna ordered it crated up, and they began using the M.Aw HQ for storage."

Another question came to me. I activated my PipBuck's inventory arrangement spell and opened my saddlebags. Then stopped, checking to make sure: “Can you see me?”

“Yes, Littlepip. I can see you.”

Thought so.

I floated out the two statuettes I had found. “What are these?”

Of course Watcher knew the answer. “Limited Edition Ponies of Harmony. Those are some pretty nice little magical artifacts you have there. Only forty-two were ever made.”

“Forty-two?” I was expecting closer to six.

“Equestria’s heroines, the six pony friends whose virtues matched the Elements of Harmony. There were seven sets made – one for each of them, and one that Luna kept for herself. The ponies mostly gave them to each other, although a few of the statuettes were passed on to loved ones or family members.”

That made sense. Sweetie Belle had her sister’s. Applejack would have given one of herself to her buckfriend Applesnack. I wondered if the one I found in old Appleloosa had originally been a gift for Braeburn.

“Oh. Now I remember who your new friend sounds like.” The name Watcher told me made me glad I wasn’t drinking Sparkle~Cola again.

“Who was…?” I never got to finish my question. A crack of static replaced Watcher with the voice of Red Eye, who was in the middle of telling everyone that raiders, ghouls and hellhounds were bad. His voice faded as the sprite-bot wandered aimlessly away from me until it was swallowed entirely by the mist.

* * *

Four Stars was an elevated train company which had once provided public transportation for the Manehattan metropolis. SteelHooves suggested that, if the monorails were still intact, it would make the easiest route through the city, carrying us over the maze of rubble and away from most of the radiation-twisted aberrations and occasional raiders that lurked in the ruins.

It sounded like a good plan, so I stopped at a still-illuminated sign mapping out the rails. This station was part of the Luna Line. The Celestia Line, which crossed it at several points, lead straight to Tenpony Tower.

Calamity finished rummaging through the garbage bins, returning with a surprising collection of sellable items and a few dozen bottle caps. Velvet Remedy rolled her eyes. “Well, I hope that’s enough for you to buy a bath once we get to Tenpony.”

I looked across the waiting station towards the heavy doors into the more castle-like office structure. There were blackened panels that looked like turret emplacements which had been destroyed ages ago. Curiously, I trotted over to the door and tried it. Locked.

Well, that was just begging for me to open it.

“What are you doing?” SteelHooves asked as he and the others joined me.

“I want to see what’s inside,” I said simply, focusing on the lock. This was a hard one. Four Stars did not want to give up its secrets easily. Which only made me all the more intent on learning what those secrets were.

I heard Calamity make a snicker that clearly translated to “told you so”.

The lock clicked. Triumphantly, I swung the door open.

In an eye-blink, I registered the expanse of the grey lobby, its semicircular desk fortified with sandbags and makeshift barricades. In that glimpse, I saw the scattered bodies of a dozen Steel Rangers – suits of magical power armor holding skeletal pony remains. And I saw the three scorched holes in the ceiling which had once held turrets.

The remaining turret on the Four Stars' lobby ceiling swung around and opened fire. I was taken by surprise, but Velvet Remedy had been prepared. Her shield burst around me even as the air was filled with the rat-tat-tat-tat of machine gun fire. However, the shield gave no protection; the bullets ripped right through it. Then through my armor and through me. My body tore apart in agony, dozens of things going horribly wrong inside all at once as at least six shots passed clean through me and buried themselves in the station's floor tiles.

I barely heard the explosive roar of SteelHooves' grenade machine gun as I collapsed, sound and light fleeting from me. It was as if I was falling down a well. Through the distant ring above, I could see the ceiling detonate in a mass of fireballs, then come raining down with a distant thunder, collapsing into the lobby below.

* * *

I returned to the wasteland of the living, alert and in pain; Velvet Remedy was pouring another extra-strength restoration potion down my throat. I choked, gasping.

"Welcome back, Littlepip. We came *very* close to losing you," Velvet's voice was stern with worry.

"W-what happened?"

Calamity's voice called out from somewhere further into the rubble. "Armor-piercing bullets." His voice sounded disbelieving and alarmed.

"Stop!" ordered SteelHooves. I panicked, wondering what I was doing that I could stop, but his exclamation was directed towards Calamity. "I will not let you loot the bodies of fallen Rangers."

"Hey," Calamity shot back, "In case ya didn't notice, they ain't usin' this stuff anymore. An' the ammo that ridiculous battle saddle of yers throws around ain't cheap and ain't the sorta stuff ya find in raiders' ammo boxes or the desk drawers of office buildin's. We need t' scavenge it from wherever we can, whenever we can." Calamity quieted a moment, then trotted into view with a missile in his mouth. "Fhrusf meh, 'hey ain' whissen if."

He spat out the missile into a pile he was collecting, shooting a glower at SteelHooves.

I looked to Velvet Remedy who was prodding me to drink more. "Right. From now on, sneak into buildings that might not be friendly."

SteelHooves made his way back to me. I wondered how covert-super-deathpony-like I looked to him now, my armor full of holes and covered in my own sticky blood. (I would need to have it cleaned and mended when I got to Tenpony Tower. Or maybe sooner. I was guessing I didn't look much better than I had coming out of Ponyville.)

"You definitely got my attention," he said and turned towards the nearest dead Ranger. "Now I want to know more about this building too."

I nodded. "Okay. Let's split up." I considered keeping Velvet Remedy at my side, but realized it wasn't the best play. "SteelHooves with me. Velvet, would you mind staying with Calamity? You two look into the rest of this floor and the basement. We'll check out the offices upstairs."

Velvet smiled. And then fixed me with a harsh stare. “Be careful. A *lot* more careful than *this* was.”

I promised.

Attention All Four Stars employees:

In conjunction with new safety and security protocols, all employees will be issued a standard military-class firearm. This firearm is to be worn at all times while on company property. Failure to do so, or failure to keep your firearm well-maintained and properly loaded, will be grounds for termination under employee uniform policy 13-B.

In the unlikely event of incursion onto Four Stars private property by government forces, all employees are required to defend Four Stars proprietary property and executive personnel. All employees are therefore required to attend at least one of the three Four-Star-Defense and Teamwork-Building weekend training programs this month. Failure to do so will be grounds for termination under employee attendance policy 6-F.

Daisy May will be providing some of her lovely homebaked flower cookies for refreshments after the FSDTB exercises. Yum!

I’d read that same message before; it was on each terminal I’d hacked into. It didn’t make any more sense to me now than the first time. I looked over to SteelHooves, checking to make sure everything was all right, before I clicked the next one.

I figured now was as good a time as any to ask, “SteelHooves, have you ever heard of someone named Flutter*guy?*”

SteelHooves whinnied. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I heard somepony say your voice sounded like Flutterguy.”

SteelHooves gave a little stomp. “Heard that before.” My ears perked. I’d figured it was a long shot at best that SteelHooves would have knowledge about the pony Watcher had mentioned. I opened my muzzle to ask, but he silenced me. “It’s just a joke.”

Oh. So much for insight. I turned back to the terminal messages.

Evacuation Policy, Employee Version:

We here at Four Stars value your commitment to the company. In the extremely unlikely event of a federal raid, or worse, a megaspell attack, it is every employee's duty to bodyguard key personnel and ensure the safe evacuation of all employees in the following order:

1) *President of Four Stars and any Shareholders on property*
2) *Members of Executive Management*
3) *Head Researchers*
4) *The President's Secretary, Daisy May*

> 5) Members of Mid-Level Management
> 6) Research Assistants with Red, Black or Gold-level clearance
> 7) Research Assistants with Orange or White-level clearance
> 8) Floor Supervisors
>
> *Once all the above have been safely evacuated from the property, we encourage you to seek your own safety.*
>
> *To ensure your protection, we are issuing military-class armor-piercing ammo to all employees above the Supervisor level.*

I sat back from the terminal and promised myself that if ever I was somehow hurled back in time, I would never go to work here.

There was a surprising amount of still-functional arcano-technology in this building. Or, at least, there had been. SteelHooves was not subtle, and every time he took out one of the security brain-bots or spider-like guard bots, he did massive damage to everything nearby. Scavenging had been reduced to finding things inside metal desks or looting boxes of ammo.

Fortunately, there were quite a few of each. Nobody had safely broken into this place in centuries, and the sheer number of ammo boxes alone could have supported a small army. Calamity had been right. Not one of the boxes included missiles or grenade ammo. But we had enough of just about everything else, including a lot of armor-piercing rounds, to last a good long time. With extra to sell. The prevalence of armor-piercing ammo had SteelHooves convinced this place had been fortifying specifically against the Steel Rangers.

There was one more. And this one seemed a private message, not duplicated on any other terminal yet.

Re: Satin:

> *I hear that the Ministry of Morale got her. Charges of sedition. MoM agents broke into her house in the middle of the night last weekend and hauled her away.*
>
> *Management is throwing fits on the floor above me; they seem sure Satin will say something, or worse, remember something. All I know is, I'm expecting armored Ministry goons to buck in the doors any day now.*
>
> *Fuck these appleseed shooters. I'm going to start bringing my gun from home!*

* * *

SteelHooves turned away, protecting my flank, as I snuck forward. I split my attention between the hall and my E.F.S. compass as I scouted ahead – checking rooms, digging into desks and looking through bookshelves, until another splash of red lit up on my compass. Backtracking, I pointed SteelHooves in the direction of the next hostile; then I lingered back in a side room, not wanting to be caught in the backwash that accompanied any attack he made in a narrow hallway.

A robotic voice called out, *"This is private property, federal pigs! Surrender and be annihilated!"* It was immediately followed by the whoosh of a rocket. The hallway erupted in flame. To my surprise, I heard SteelHooves hit the floor.

Luna shitting moon rocks! That was from the security robot! What kind of robot fires missiles?

I pulled out my sniper rifle, loading armor-piercing bullets into it. Then, crouching low, I took a peek around the corner.

The robot took up most of the hall, and looked like the mutant child of a Steel Ranger and a tank. Its four legs ended in tredded balls that propelled it slowly down the corridor. I counted at least three weapons, including a missile launcher turret and a minigun set into a swiveling chest mount that could rotate 180 degrees around the robot's frame.

My mind searched for an appropriate level of profanity, but came up blank as a newborn's flank.

The thing was rolling towards SteelHooves, who was moving but down. The chest minigun swung towards the fallen Ranger. I was quite certain that it had armor-piercing ammo of its own.

Leaping around the corner, I swung the sniper rifle and stared down its scope. That minigun stopped pointing towards SteelHooves and began to turn towards me as I slid into S.A.T.S.' targeting nirvana. The sniper rifle roared off three shots in quick succession.

The first two bullets punched small holes in the "head" of the tank-like sentinel, seeming to only slightly impare its targeting. The sentinel's minigun tore up the wall, a single bullet tearing into my armor for a deeply grazing hit across my left flank.

My third shot hit struck into the missile turret, which promptly exploded. The rockets had been designed to take out a Steel Ranger; they were just as effective in rendering the sentinel inert.

My left hindleg felt wobbly, fresh blood mixing with the matted, sticky mess of my coat. I hobbled over to SteelHooves. His armor was administering healing potions and bolstering drugs. The armor's self-repair spell was consuming scrap metal from an armored compartment over his right flank, rebuilding itself. I stopped a moment to marvel at what Applejack and her Ministry had created.

"Will you be okay?" I asked. SteelHooves nodded, stalwartly not moaning. "Then I'll be right back. I want to know what that monster was guarding."

* * *

The sentinel robot had been guarding the office suite of the President of Four Stars. The desk was armored, designed for use as a barricade, and there was a hidden panel in the wall… well, it would have been hidden if it had been closed. The desk was locked. Picking it cost me a bobby pin and netted me what looked like a security passcard. I nickered at the irony, suspecting the card would have let us freely pass by all the robotic security we had to fight through to get here.

Several locked boxes of ammo were hidden under the desk. As I opened the first, I found half a dozen matrix-disruption grenades. I knew immediately that they were designed to disrupt the spell matrixes of Steel Ranger armor, rendering them helpless just as the alicorn's attack had done to SteelHooves. But I couldn't help thinking how such grenades would also disrupt the more mundane technologies of most robots, including the one guarding this room. "Magical shotgun of dragonslaying in the dragon's chamber, indeed."

It took me several tries to hack into the computer, each time backing out before it could recognize the intrusion and lock me out completely.

Evacuation Policy, Executive Version:

> *When Manehattan suffers a megaspell event – or worse, if the Ministry of Morale stages a raid on this property – all executive officers of Four Stars are to proceed to the basement stable in accordance to evacuation procedures ZS 1A – 5D, listed below. Please keep to your assigned routes.*
>
> *The Four Stars Stable is guaranteed to keep you safely protected in the event of either catastrophe, and has food, water and medical supplies to outlast even a complete megaspell event – nearly twelve whole weeks' worth!*
>
> *The FSS also includes an armory, firing range to keep in practice and plenty of reading material to keep you occupied. These include instruction manuals on how to acclimate yourself to the new exterior environment once aftereffects of megaspell detonations have subsided, and proper etiquette for greeting our ruling zebra benefactors.*

Okie. Dokey. Lokey.

Steel Rangers were not Ministry of Morale. Somepony had called in the big guns. And worse, the ponies in charge had been expecting it. What were they doing?

According to the attached map, the "hidden" stairs would lead us right down to the basement. We should be able to meet up with Calamity and Velvet Remedy swiftly from there.

I began picking the lock on the weapon's cabinet. Like the terminal, it pushed the limits of my skills. I was tempted to use one of my Party-Time Mint-als to give me that extra edge. But just before I gave up and did so, the cabinet opened.

Inside was an armored dress unlike any I'd seen before – red and black with golden trim, perfectly preserved. I pulled it out and draped it over my back, thinking Velvet Remedy would look stunning in it. The armor also came with a helmet, but I was tempted to leave it. The flourish of red feathers almost screamed "target".

Also inside were several assault carbines of a peculiar and impressive design. One of them was scoped and fitted with a silencer. It had a custom wood-carved handle stained with stripes of white and black.

* * *

"Been waiting for you, Li'lpip." Calamity smiled at me as I joined him in the basement. He and Velvet Remedy stood before a door sealed with a terminal. Looking at the terminal, I was pleased to discover that it had a magic eye for scanning passcards. Damn thing would be useful after all.

I offered Velvet Remedy the outfit I had found. She shunned the helmet as “garish”, but soon had Calamity helping her into the armored dress. I turned my attention to the terminal, floating up the passcard.

“Where in hell did you find that?” SteelHooves’ voice boomed as he finally caught up with us. I turned to look at him as I telekinetically held the passcard in place. SteelHooves had stopped at the bottom of the stairs and was staring at Velvet Remedy.

“Littlepip found it in a locker upstairs,” Velvet Remedy answered, prancing. “How do you think it looks on me?”

“Beautiful,” answered Calamity with a breath. “The red and gold matches the streaks in your mane and tail.” Then with a sheepish grin, “And I’ve never seen anything like it. Which means nopony will mistake you for a raider or slaver and accidentally shoot you.”

The terminal’s magic eye looked over the passcard and bleeped happily. “Welcome Missus President!” Inner mechanics began to hiss and grind as the door began to open. This wasn’t anything as sophisticated as a Stable-Tec door, but it was certainly a few grades above anything I’d seen in the wasteland.

“I might shoot her,” SteelHooves grumbled. We all shot him perplexed and nasty looks.

“That,” he explained, “Is a Zebra Legionnaire’s uniform.”

Calamity whistled. Velvet Remedy suddenly looked uncomfortable. I turned away, choosing to look instead into the darkness of the open mini-stable in front of me.

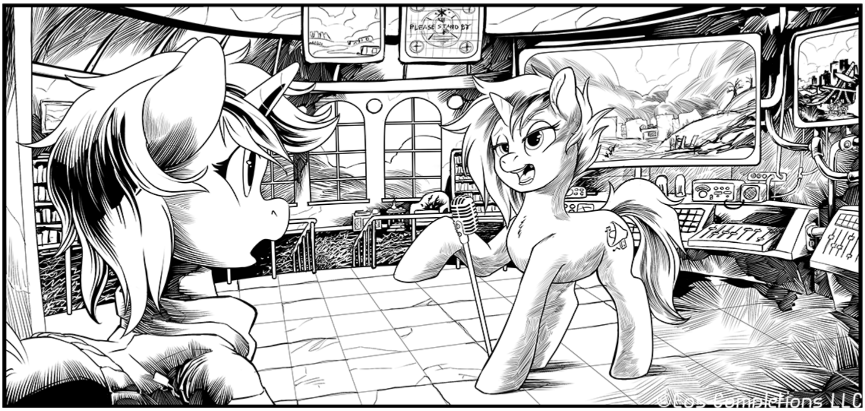
Gleaming in the darkness, the eyes of at least a dozen zombie-ponies stared back at me. Then I did a double-take. Zombies, yes. But not ponies.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Action Filly (level one) – You know your targeting spell like the back of your hoof, making you about 20% cooler in combat. For each level of this perk, you gain +15 action points in S.A.T.S.

Chapter Sixteen

Towers



"You see? We remain the very picture of courtesy, even in the face of such impolite accusations. We have nothing to hide here."

Manehattan.

Just over two hundred years ago, it was a thriving, bustling metropolis. Manehattan was hailed as the most cosmopolitan city in all of Equestria. Millions of ponies lived or worked in the city, and it was home to some of the most elite circles of Equestrian society.

Then, in an instant, Manehattan was gone. Millions of pony lives were consumed in a flash of light, heat and magical energy. Hundreds of thousands more were killed by the shockwaves and the eldritch green fires that incinerated virtually everything that was left standing.

Now, all that remained of Manehattan in the aftermath of that apocalypse were the Manehattan Ruins: miles upon miles of maze-like urban devastation and ashes under the shadows of skeletal skyscrapers that rose out of the wreckage like monolithic tombstones.

A pony might wonder how such a holocaust could have been allowed to happen. How could Equestria's enemies have smuggled such a cataclysmic weapon into the very heart of our grandest and largest metropolis?

I found it was much easier to understand now that I knew that the most significant public transportation company in Manehattan was run by traitor ponies loyal to Equestria's enemies, and that the basement of this very facility had been the staging ground for zebra operations within our homeland.

I stared into the eyes of the zombie-zebras and realized that *this* was how they had gotten the balefire bomb into Manehattan. That *these* zebras had been responsible for the murder of millions.

I also realized that the mini-stable under Four Stars fell far short of Stable-Tec's quality

– for all the harm Stable-Tec's playing around had done, those ponies really knew how to build a survival shelter. This inferior stable had not been able to stop magical radiation from bleeding in, transforming the zebras (and almost a dozen ponies) it had been intended to protect into the ghoulish creatures before me.

And yes, I realized they might not be zombie-zebras so much as ghoul-zebras. I'd say I didn't care, but part of me actually hoped they were ghouls as I stepped back out of the way.

"SteelHooves! Give 'em everything you've got!"

* * *

The fog lifted by mid afternoon, revealing the graveyard of the Manehattan Ruins beneath a sky of rolling, angry grey. We walked above it, traveling single-file along one of the twin monorails of the Luna Line, looking down on the blocks of city rubble below. In all directions we saw collapsed and gutted buildings, blackened chariots and wagons, detritus and blown litter that congregated about the metal shafts of shattered streetlamps. No skeletons, though. The living creatures of Manehattan had been reduced to nothing more than ash, mixing with the ash from a billion other sources as it was carried by the wind.

I was beginning to spot a few small places where green balefire still burned. I wondered how even balefire could have survived for centuries.

The wind carried particles of rust and ash, as well as the smells of the urban graveyard. A symphony of creaks and groans haunted the city, mixing with the sounds of shifting and crumbling concrete and the hammering of wind-blown metal. Occasional staccatos of gunfire, usually distant and carried on echoes, reminded us that there were raiders, scavengers and others ponies lurking in hidden streets and darkened structures.

A flash of green and gold shot past us from behind – a magnificent bird both terrifying and graceful which spread its wings and circled as if taking in our measure. Its eyes seemed to glow and licks of balefire fell from its beak.

"What is that?" Velvet Remedy asked with a tone of awe before I could find the words to ask for myself.

"Balefire Phoenix," SteelHooves replied, whistling slightly.

The green and gold bird completed its circle, then swooped down and away, disappearing from sight as it threaded through shadowed alleys.

We began to move again, all except Velvet Remedy who just stood there as if mesmerized. She turned to SteelHooves, breathily demanding, "Tell me about them."

Whinnying, we all halted again. (Interesting fact about traveling single-file: if one pony stops, unless they're at the back, travel tends to stop with them.) I found myself staring at a ruined billboard whose bottle of Sparkle~Cola RAD seemed to actually glow. ("It's like a buck to the face! With radishes!") Billboards littered the sky along the Luna Line like weeds.

"The Manehattan Gardens was the largest wildlife sanctuary of its kind, home to the most exotic and admired creatures. All of which were instantly cremated when the zebras' balefire bomb detonated," SteelHooves explained. "Of course, a phoenix doesn't exactly have the same relationship with being turned to ash that most creatures do."

SteelHooves chuckled. “I wouldn’t be thinking of trying to domesticate one. They breathe fire.”

* * *

A battered sea-blue mare fled out of a doorless storefront and started running down the street, tears streaming from her eyes as she screamed.

A dozen raider ponies, each carrying a brutal weapon and wearing an old roller derby helmet, came tearing out of the building after her, jumping out the windows and charging out the door, whooping and laughing.

“Help me!” She stumbled as she ran, her gait hobbled. Blood ran down between her thighs; I could see her bleeding through my scope. *“Please somepony help me!”* She’d already been raped repeatedly. Now they had let her go and were chasing her for sport.

From the height of the Luna Line, we were too far for S.A.T.S. to effectively lock on, so I trailed the scope in front of the first raider – a mottled brown and grey pony with a cutie mark of a skull with burning eyes – aiming for where he was about to be as Calamity instructed.

“Good, now keep ’er steady an’ squeeze out a burst.”

I magically pulled the trigger. Three shots spat out of the scoped zebra assault carbine. Silenced weapons, I learned, were not really silent; but the dampened sound was lost in the wind, and the weight of the silencer helped soften the recoil and keep the rifle on target between bullets.

The raider pony burst into flame. He fell to the ground, screaming and thrashing.

I stepped back, floating up the rifle to check the clip while Calamity took a shot. No, I hadn’t accidentally loaded magical bullets. The zebra rifle had enchanted the bullet itself.

Stick a horn where Celestia don’t shine! If this was the sort of weapon that zebras had been carrying onto the battlefield…

The screams of the victim mare below wrenched my attention back to the battle. Calamity fired off a second shot. Pulling the scope to my eyes, I saw that three of the raiders were now dead (one of the corpses burning in the street), and the others were scattering. The panicking mare screamed, her hooves catching on a toppled streetlamp, and fell, skidding across the debris-strewn street.

One of the raiders was still charging towards her; I swung the scope towards him. And froze as I really saw him – one of the rapists had been a blank-flanked colt!

I stared, following the very young pony with the zebra rifle’s scope, trembling slightly. He was wearing a colts roller-derby helmet and clenched a serrated knife in his mouth. I could see her blood on him. I focused, the trigger of the zebra rifle moving slightly…

I couldn’t. It was a *colt!*

Horrified, I watched as the colt reached the fallen mare dodging the kicks she threw at him. I heard the crack of gunfire feet from me, and saw the colt’s body rupture bloodily in two places, hit with enough force to fling his corpse against a nearby mailbox.

I lowered the zebra rifle and turned to stare at Calamity in shock. On the other side of him, Velvet Remedy’s eyes were wide.

“What?” Calamity asked before flying down to help the mare. “Did Ah steal yer shot?”

Ponies love laughter. Zebras do not understand joy and fear it.
Ponies are honest. Zebras tell only lies.
Ponies are loyal. Zebras will knife you in the back.
Ponies are generous. Zebras are selfish and greedy.
Ponies care about each other. Zebras care only about themselves.

I stared up at the billboard and thought: wow.

"That's… that's just wrong," Velvet Remedy said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had become our traveling companion since Calamity shot the raider colt.

The twin monorail tracks took a graceful curve, and the billboard was mounted across the flying buttresses of a squat skyscraper, placed so that the train ponies would see it as they approached the turn. It would have dominated the view out one side of the elevated train as it took the bend.

Calamity had flown off ahead, more to give us space than out of a need to scout. The Luna Line seemed free of threats.

I really wanted a Party-Time Mint-al. I didn't have any particular need for one, but I felt myself craving the effects, especially the intellectual boost. I could just think so much faster, so much more clearly while benefiting from a PTM. I was more aware, my senses more acute.

If that's what Party-Time Mint-als did for me, I began to wonder what they did for Pinkie Pie?

I found myself thinking about Four Stars again. Based on what we had found in the mini-stable (which wasn't much after SteelHooves' ordnance was finished with the zebras), the Ministry of Morale raid must have happened the same morning that the balefire bomb was set off. It occurred to me that the megaspell was probably in transit when they attacked.

The Ministry of Morale had brought in Steel Rangers; they knew what they were heading into called for the big guns. Knowing where to look, who to interrogate… did that come from the skill of the ponies in her employ, or did Pinkie Pie herself discern these things with the power of PTM-enhanced acumen? Biased, I presumed the latter.

No matter what negative effects she might have suffered from PTM addiction, Pinkie Pie had intuition that bordered on precognition. The traitors were terrified of her Ministry; she had them paranoid and scurrying. And no matter what anypony might say about either her or her Ministry, Pinkie Pie had come heartbreakingly close to saving Manehattan.

I stopped, looking out over the desolate urban maze. Millions of ponies had died here, their salvation racing the clock and losing.

I had to find something else to think about. I switched on DJ Pon3's radio broadcast, listening to it in my earbloom. It was merely a distraction; I knew all the songs by heart now. I hoped DJ Pon3 found something in the records we carried worthy of expanding his musical repertoire.

> *"This just in,"* DJ Pon3 announced between songs, *"Just got a report that a weak distress signal can be heard near Horseshoe Tower. Seems like Blackwing's Talons have managed to get themselves in over their beaks. Well, don't worry, Blackwing.*

Horseshoe Tower's pretty close to Sheriff Rottingtail's territory. Maybe some of his ghouls will be willing to lend you a hoof. Oh, wait, that's right, you and your mercs slaughtered them all. Well, good luck with that.

"This is DJ Pon3 reminding everypony in the Equestrian Wasteland: you reap what you sow."

Calamity was flying back towards us. I turned off the radio on my PipBuck as he landed on the monorail, "Y'all gonna love this."

Several minutes later, we had trotted far enough along the curve to see what Calamity had told us about. Ahead, the Celestia Line crossed over the Luna Line. About twenty feet above the Luna Line, running perpendicular to the twin monorails below. The dark underside of the twin Celestia rails struck me as bizarrely textured, giving me the creeps.

"Well how do we get up there?" Velvet Remedy scoffed.

Calamity rolled his eyes and fluttered his wings. "Ah carry y'all up is how. 'Cept Ah'm thinkin' our Steel Ranger friend is a might heavy for me."

"I can levitate him up as you carry me," I offered.

Calamity nodded. "All right then. Jus' be careful, Li'lpip. Ya don't wanna disturb the bloodwings."

"Bloodwings?" I floated out the binoculars, peering through them at the Celestia Line, and cringed with a gasp. The shadowed underbellies of the monorails were covered with the grotesque, leathery forms of dozens of giant, mutant bats.

"Ayep. Ah figure we best make good time t' Tenpony. Reckon we don't wanna be outside in the open come nightfall."

⁂

As difficult as it was to get onto the Celestia Line, getting off the monorail was easy. Twilight was falling as we rounded a bend and were met with a graceful arch of tarnished silver which flowed up and over the monorails. Through the arch, we could finally see Tenpony Tower in its surprisingly well-preserved splendor. We had been catching glimpses of it above and between the buildings for hours, but only now could we really take in the size and ornateness of the structure.

Light glowed behind more than half of the windows, most of which bore fractures but were fully intact. The building narrowed every dozen stories with a level ringed by a patio balcony, the fencing around each spotted with crude repair. One whole side of Tenpony Tower was blackened and sagging, bulwarked by patchwork reinforcements added over post-apocalyptic decades. The original name of the building had collapsed into the cobblestone courtyard below. A huge radio broadcast tower rose from the roof towards the sky.

The monorails passed under the archway (which would once have been dazzling in the sun) and right up to Tenpony Tower, where they ran through a Four Stars embarking station built into the side of the tower many stories above the ground.

From the tarnished arch hung a sign proclaiming:

Ministry of Arcane Science
Manehattan Hub

Entering the station, we saw guard ponies barricaded behind massive steel walls, watching our approach through narrow slits as they followed our progress with their guns. The walls of the station were decorated with life-size paintings of ponies. Once, the paintings had been protected by fields of magical energy similar to Velvet Remedy's spell. Now, most of the paintings were blackened, damaged or defaced beyond repair, the shields having failed and the gemstones which held their enchantments stolen. All save for one: a painting of a familiar purple unicorn, the once pink and violet stripes in her mane mostly changed to grey.

I hopped onto the sidewalk that ran along the wall, giving the painting a closer look. The edges were charred and the paint had blistered in the heat, but the protective field still held.

The others paused, watching me, but I waved them on. "I just want to look. I'll catch up." Each of my companions nodded and trotted on, none of them seeming to possess my curiosity.

While no spring filly, Twilight Sparkle looked at least a decade younger in this painting than in the memory of Pinkie Pie's last party, and considerably happier. She was surrounded by crisp autumn colors, a number of hazy, barely-rendered ponies creating colorful blotches around her in the background. Her cutie mark was hidden, covered by a flank-blanket bearing the number 10.

"The Running of the Leaves," a voice announced from behind me, startling me so badly I nearly jumped back to my death. I turned to glare at the sprite-bot which had seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

"Twilight Sparkle ran it every year in Ponyville. Never won." To me, the mechanical voice sounded… nostalgic? "That was, until the Ministry demanded all of her time."

I gazed at the purple pony with the "10" on her flank; then I looked up to the mostly intact skyscraper which had once been a Ministry of Magic hub, the massive letters that once advertised its name fallen and shattered on the ground below. And then looked back.

"Heh," I smiled.

Turning to the sprite-bot, "How did you know Twi…" But with a crack of static, Watcher was gone, the sprite-bot suddenly spewing tuba-music. I scowled as I watched the spherical robot bob away. Was it just me, or were conversations with Watcher getting shorter?

* * *

"Ponies don't simply walk into Tenpony Tower," the guardpony informed us, scowling through an armored window as he spoke through the intercom. The words NO ZOMBIES! were painted across the gate in huge red letters.

"We have business with DJ Pon3," Velvet Remedy stated loftily. "Although if you want to explain to him that you turned us away…"

"DJ Pon3 is expecting you, then?"

"Absolutely," Velvet Remedy lied silkily. "And if I were you, I would not keep him waiting."

"All of you?" the voice was skeptical.

Velvet Remedy gave an overly dramatic sigh. "This is my bodyguard," she claimed, pointing to Calamity. "And I'm sure you recognize a member of the Steel Rangers."

"I-I do…"

"And…" Velvet looked to me and seemed to draw a blank.

Hastily, I offered, "Toaster repairpony." Everypony gave me a strange look. "His… um… toaster's on the fritz?" Velvet Remedy looked pained.

The guard contemplated us silently. Finally, Velvet Remedy said, "Look, as much as I'd love to just stand here outside while you get in trouble for not letting us in, it is getting dark. Would one hundred bottle caps help move this along?"

"Two hundred."

"One-hundred and twenty-five. And I don't tell DJ Pon3 that you tried to extort his guests."

"Fine." The gun slot opened in the door. "Slide the caps through, then you can come in." I started pulling out and counting bottle caps. I was going to have to start bundling them into small pouches of twenty to make this sort of thing easier. Two hundred was a large chunk of the bottle caps we'd managed to acquire, but I wasn't worried. We had plenty of guns and ammo to sell once inside.

"Oh," the guard added, "And you'll have to disarm before passing through the checkpoint."

Stick a horn…

"Y'all ain't gettin' muh battle saddle less ya pry it offa my cold, dead…"

The guard scoffed. "Wouldn't expect to. You don't have to turn in your firearms and battle saddles. Just your ammo. All of it."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. Unexpected. That also severely cut our trade goods, but at least left us with the more expensive and heavier objects to sell off.

As we passed through the checkpoint, a unicorn stepped out of the guardpost and waved her horn over us. Every clip, bullet, grenade and missile flashed, visible even through SteelHooves' metal armor. "Toaster repairpony," she repeated with a demure smile as her gaze passed over my sniper rifle, combat shotgun, zebra rifle, assault carbine…

I facehoofed.

"And a Steel Ranger?" she asked as she removed the missiles from the left side of SteelHooves' battle saddle. "What is your story?"

SteelHooves whinnied. "I'm just here to make sure you don't have any more nasty ghoul problems."

"Oh, that is no longer a concern," she smiled. "But thank you for the concern."

"Indeed. Can't have a filthy ghoul just walking in anywhere."

Calamity was shooting SteelHooves dark looks. Velvet Remedy nickered under her breath, just loud enough to make sure she was heard, "Oh yes. They're unsightly things. Can't imagine anything worse, except maybe a colt-killer."

Calamity neighed and rolled his eyes, lowering the brim of his hat.

In minutes, we were divested of all our ammunition. "You will get all of this back when you leave," the unicorn promised primly as she collected it all and floated it into the guardhouse.

"Ah feel… strangely nekkid," Calamity complained. At least my weapons had only been reduced to fancy clubs.

"You can probably buy some rubber bullets from Chief Grim Star if you really feel you need to," the unicorn informed us as the guardhouse door slid shut behind her. Calamity and I exchanged surprised looks. It was the first I'd heard of anypony utilizing non-lethal ordnance.

There was a loud *CLANK* as something released inside the ornate, armored double doors in front of us. They opened, swinging inwards and revealing the marbled, chandelier-lit station lobby of Tenpony Tower.

⁂

We were getting looks. The idea of high society was completely foreign to me. We'd had nothing like this sort of bizarre elitism in Stable Two. The wasteland was a dirty, broken, rusted place that was completely at odds with stuffy behavior; the only reason a pony might walk around with their nose in the air in places like New Appleloosa was because they didn't want to smell what they were walking in.

"Let us hurry and find a place to make bed," Velvet Remedy pushed. "I need a bath."

"Hell, these folk're makin' me feel like *Ah* need a bath," Calamity said, his head low, feeling the weight of all the stares.

"You do."

I nodded, wondering just how we would find a place to stay. We were walking across a mezzanine filled with high-class shops (or, at least, high-class relative to the rest of the Equestrian Wasteland). If we wanted to buy or sell anything here, Velvet Remedy had her work cut out for her. I suspected that she was the only one with enough mercantile savoir-faire to get these ponies to even talk to her.

Velvet Remedy seemed to read my mind. "Once we've bathed and rested, we should split up. I'll take our goods to sell first thing in the morning, and then purchase us some new formal wear that will help us blend in. Littlepip, you should look into meeting with DJ Pon3." I agreed.

"Ah want t' find a workshop. Ah want t' modify muh battle saddle. Until travelin' with Li'lpip, Ah never had more'n one type o' ammo. Want t' set up a quick way t' swap 'tween ammo types. Be nice t' be able t' use rubber bullets when the situation calls fer it." He looked at Velvet and me. "Y'all should give me yer guns so Ah can do them some proper maintenance while Ah'm at it."

Velvet Remedy floated her needler pistol over to him. "Situations like shooting a colt, perhaps?"

Calamity neighed. "Nope. Ah see a raider, ah'm gonna take 'im down." The rust-colored pony stared defiantly at Velvet Remedy, proudly insisting, "It's muh policy."

"It was a *child!"* Velvet Remedy hissed, giving a stomp.

I looked around; my companions were beginning to make a scene. "um… maybe we should save this for…"

"Anypony who chooses t' be a filthy, murderin' *raider* gets tried an' perforated as an adult," Calamity asserted.

"And you think a colt or filly in that situation had any actual *choice?"*

Calamity's eyes narrowed and he cocked his head. "Well, maybe not. Damn tragedy.

But that don't mean Ah'm gonna give 'im a free pass t' rape and murder till he gets his cutie mark. His would-be future victims don't deserve that." Calamity's voice was rising dangerously. "In case ye didn't notice, My Little Rapist down there…"

"Shut up!" I finally ordered. "I swear to the Goddesses, I'm going to put you both in corners!"

Velvet Remedy and Calamity both bristled. But the interruption was enough to get them to look around and realize that this was not the place to be having that particular fight. The two of them remained silent for the rest of the evening while I found us a place at *Goldentail's Luxury Suites*. It was a beautiful room, the marble walls only slightly cracked, the twin bathtubs were only lightly stained and the sheets on the beds were not too worn or frayed. I probably paid double what Velvet Remedy would have gotten it for, but I was happy just to get them away from the public.

⁂

Tempers were more even the next morning. We had all bathed and washed our clothing. Calamity spent the first part of the morning sewing and patching our armor. My armored utility barding had been crusted with blood and punctured with bullet holes. Meanwhile, Velvet Remedy packed up the weapons and scavenged items for trade and headed out before the stores were open, wanting to look over her options.

I spent the morning hungry. We decided that we would wait until Velvet Remedy returned with proper Tenpony attire before heading out to buy food. There were several swanky-looking restaurants that we had passed on our way to *Goldentail's Luxury Suites,* and I was sick of canned and boxed pre-war food (which, as Velvet reminded us, we were almost out of and would need to stock up on).

I took the chance to relax, laying on one of the beds and reading. I'd nearly finished all of the books I had collected, and I had contemplated giving most of them to Velvet Remedy to sell. But in the end, I decided that I would rather keep them back at my Junction R-7 home. Start a library.

When Velvet Remedy returned, bringing us all new clothing (even a stately cloak for SteelHooves), I nearly fell out of bed at the sight of her. She'd treated herself to a new coiffure and ponypedi, and she was wearing a classy new dress with matching new jewelry along with a demure touch of blush. She fluttered her longer-than-ever eyelashes at me and I felt faint. Part of me hated her for making me want her so much.

"Wow… Velvet you look…" Calamity flushed, looking a little overheated. But he stammered something about hoping she had saved enough bottle caps for us to have breakfast.

She turned up her nose at him, "Of course I did." Looking to me, she broke into a gleeful grin, clopping her hooves. "And we have plenty extra to do a little shopping."

"What do they have?"

Velvet Remedy smirked, rolling her eyes. "Oh you wouldn't believe. These ponies have taken full-of-themselves to a whole new level." She snickered. "Two floors down, there is a shop that sells only cheese. Right across from a shop that sells only wine."

As classy as she could be, Velvet Remedy didn't put any more value in being snobbish than the rest of us. "But of course, half the fun of shopping is just looking. Why, was there something you were looking for?"

"Some new books. And rubber bullets."

Velvet Remedy sighed.

* * *

The restaurant was classy and filled with prim-looking ponies. I looked at my plate of "food" with a touch of depression. I don't know why I had expected much more; it wasn't as if the ponies of Tenpony Tower were farmers with fields of fresh grains. Instead, we got the same pre-war foods, only cooked in new ways and served in tiny but artistic portions.

It didn't take long to eat. And I was still hungry.

After breakfast, we split up. Calamity and SteelHooves went to find Chief Grim Star, hoping to purchase bullets and possibly a suit of armored barding more suitable for Velvet Remedy. The zebra legionnaire suit was stored away in SteelHooves' packs. Velvet Remedy didn't feel right wearing it, especially as we walked over the graves of countless ponies the zebras had murdered, and I didn't blame her. But I hated to just leave it or sell it when it could be useful.

Velvet and I went to purchase supplies. Food was a high priority. (Especially since I had no intention of eating at a restaurant again for as long as we were here.) Looking at the rows of cans and boxes in *Fine Edibles,* I cringed at the prices. "Maybe we should just get the minimum we will need for the next couple days. We're bound to find more if we do a bit of scavenging."

Velvet Remedy agreed, but only because she had other intentions for the caps we would save by doing so. We stocked up lightly, then I watched as Velvet Remedy haggled with the shop clerk until she got us a discount. As soon as we left *Fine Edibles,* I found myself being shoved into a spa where Velvet Remedy absolutely insisted we both get full-body treatments.

I was resistant at first, but as I began to unwind in the steam room, feeling muscles loosen that had probably been tight since my last night in the Stable, I found myself letting out a grand sigh of relief.

A couple of delightful spa-ponies gave us an absolutely heavenly massage. This was easily the best caps I had ever spent. And, truth be told, the spa mare hoofing my back was beginning to really turn me on.

"I heard that Fluttershy went to one of these places every week with my great, great… add a bunch of greats here… grand-auntie," Velvet Remedy confided as the lovely spa pony rubbed her hooves on my shoulders. I suddenly felt extra-awkward.

Later as we lounged in a mud bath, my eye spotted a book sitting alone on a counter. Curious, I floated it over to take a look. *"Principles of Proper Pony Speech,"* I read aloud. "Refining how we think by refining how we speak." I opened the book and looked down the title page. At the bottom, in small words: Official guidelines from the Ministry of Image.

I decided I'd ask the spa pony if I could buy the book.

* * *

We were returning to our room after the most delightful morning I'd had probably ever, and my attention was focused on slipping my newly purchased book into my saddlebags, when I collided with a stallion who was backing out of the cheese shop, knocking him over. My book fell to the floor along with a number of boxes full of cheese.

I recovered and began to offer him apologies and assistance when my eyes fell the cheese-shaped cutie mark on his beige flank. "You!"

Monterey Jack stood up, dusting himself off. "Oh. It's *you.*"

A short grey unicorn wearing a refined full barding trotted out and looked at the scattered cheese. Then at us. "Is there a problem here?"

"Yeah. This… pony… tried to rob me! After I saved his life!"

Now I was the one creating a scene, and I didn't care. Velvet Remedy was staring. Monterey Jack started picking up the boxes of cheese, lifting them with his teeth by their wrapping strings. He ignored me like I was small, yapping animal.

"Is that true?" the grey unicorn asked, looking to Monterey Jack.

Monterey just snorted and finished stacking the cheese boxes, then focused, floating them towards the grey unicorn in the suit. "Sorry about that, Homage. I'll credit your account ten percent for the rough handling."

"Yes, it's true," I supplied for the beige unicorn. Of course his cutie mark looked like cheese. Monterey Jack ran the cheese shop.

A guard pony in old M.A.S. Security Armor and a LSW battle saddle was trotting towards us. Turning towards him, I pointed at Monterey. "Sir, I'd like this pony arrested."

The guard pony looked both of us up and down. "On what charge?"

"Attempted robbery."

The guard chuckled. "Monterey Jack's prices may be steep, but that's a stretch."

I shook my head. "No. I rescued him from raiders and he repaid me by trying to rob me." Turning a glare on Monterey Jack, I added, "They were going to shoot your hooves off, if I remember correctly. Maybe I should have let them."

The guard looked at me skeptically. "When was this?"

I paused, and double-checked the date on my PipBuck. "Three weeks ago." Had it really been only that long? I felt like I'd been outside a lot longer.

"Sorry," the guard said finally. "But it's your word against his, and frankly, seeing as you aren't a Tenpony citizen, your word doesn't mean much here."

I fumed. "You mean he gets away with it?"

"Littlepip," Velvet Remedy said softly, putting a calming hoof on my shoulder. "Put it in the past. He may have tried to rob you, but he didn't succeed."

I shrugged off her hoof and rounded on Monterey Jack. "So, you're going to just stand there and deny it, are you? Well I…"

"No," he said firmly.

"…am not going… wait… what?"

"Monterey?" Homage was looking at the beige cheese shop unicorn, her purchases momentarily forgotten. The guard pony had suddenly stiffened.

"I have two colts and a filly to look after. I had to make it home safely, and those supplies would have been wasted on you. You weren't even smart enough to loot corpses. You wouldn't have survived the week."

“Clearly not,” Velvet Remedy deadpanned.

“Monterey Jack,” the guard said dangerously. “Do you realize what you are admitting here?”

Monterey Jack snorted, staring at me. “I’m not a liar. And I’m not ashamed of what I tried to do. Making sure my children still have a father is more important than some foalish little stranger who doesn’t have the good sense not to walk into a slaver camp.” He looked to the guard, “After Clarinet was killed, I’m all they have left.”

The guard pony neighed. “Well, probably not anymore. You know the law. Banditry will get you executed.”

Wait, wait, *WHAT?!*

Velvet Remedy gasped. The guard clamped the bit on his battle saddle and I heard the light support weapon reload. “Sorry, Monterey Jack, but you’re going to have to come with me.”

“um… I’ve changed my mind. I’m not pressing charges. Nothing happened.”

The guard scowled at me. “Sorry kid. But it’s your word against his. And like I said, your non-citizen word doesn’t mean the dirt on my hoof around here.”

* * *

I paced back in forth outside the elevator. This was insane. They can’t kill a pony for trying and failing to rob somepony, could they? Goddesses, why didn’t I just keep my stupid mouth shut?

The elevator doors opened. I’d left Velvet Remedy looking into the laws of Tenpony Tower, hoping she could find something while I attempted to talk to DJ Pon3. Stepping into the elevator, I added this to the list of things I wanted to ask him about.

For that matter, why couldn’t Monterey Jack have just kept his own mouth shut. In the Equestrian Wasteland, honesty was *not* always a virtue.

The elevator began to glide upwards. I took a deep breath. I was about to meet DJ Pon3. I wondered what to expect. I hoped he’d be willing to talk with me. If not, this would have been a long walk for nothing. Well no, not nothing. It was a long walk for a spa treatment.

Actually still somewhat worth it.

The doors opened, and I stepped out into a rich marble foyer, the center of which was dominated by a water fountain. A huge alicorn made of age-darkened brass reared up before me, wings spread out over the foyer. The necklace around the alicorn’s neck bore a water talisman with a large sapphire set into the center. Thanks to the talisman, the fountain still flowed with fresh, clean water even two-hundred years after the apocalypse. I remembered the pure, non-irradiated water we had enjoyed in our baths and in the spa, and I wondered just how many water talismans the M.A.S. hub had. And how many could benefit from them if they weren’t all hoarded together in this one place.

Stairs wrapped around the foyer to a mezzanine level. Inset in the balcony were matching bronze letters: Ministry of Arcane Science – Manehattan. Beyond the fountain was a large set of double doors bearing the title: Twilight Sparkle Athenaeum. Above on the mezzanine was a second, nearly identical set of double doors.

M.A.S. Emergency Broadcast Station

I took a deep breath and stepped towards the stairs. A second pair of elevator doors slid open behind me. I turned to see the grey unicorn mare, Homage, step out and look around. I smiled, trying not to look nervous. “You’re here to see DJ Pon3 too?”

The other unicorn nodded. She was about my size, the only other adult pony I’d seen who was born with a similar small frame. I waved a hoof for her to go first. She was a citizen, after all.

When we reached the landing, the double doors to M.A.S.E.B.S. swung open quietly, making me think of the wild tale of Manehattan ghosts the traveling merchant had told us.

Inside were multiple maneframes and walls of computer screens giving a bird’s eye view of… the vast majority of the Equestrian Wasteland as far as I could tell. Homage clopped past me as I stopped to stare. Searching about, I spotted New Appleloosa on one of them.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Homage asked.

I nodded, noticing that while most screens had clear, sharp images, several flickered and suffered odd distortions, and one large set of screens was dead black. “You’ve been in here before?”

“Oh, a few times.” She walked over to a bank of buttons and lights, raising a hoof to press one. She turned and trotted back towards the center of the room where a microphone was raising from the floor. Homage’s horn glowed and her voice changed by magic.

“Good morning, wastelanders!” Homage cried into the mike, her voice now male and *very* familiar. “How is everypony doing? This is your pal, DJ Pon3 and, well, it’s that time again… that’s right, time for some news!”

I fell to my haunches, staring as the little grey unicorn’s voice belted over the airwaves.

“I hear rumor that Monterey Jack, cheese shop owner up in that oh-so-hoity-toity Tenpony Tower, has been arrested for deciding that being a thieving jack-ass is the appropriate response to an act of kindness. Remember what I keep telling you, my little ponies: treat each other with kindness and respect. Or don’t and watch it come back to bite you in the tail.

“In other news, somepony’s finally arrived to fix my toaster. Hallelujah! It’s breakfast time! Here’s a little Sapphire Shores to get you through the morning.”

* * *

Ten minutes later, I stood on the windswept roof of Tenpony Tower as Homage made a refining adjustment to the gemstone set into the center of one of the dishes on the broadcast tower.

I stared out over the grey labyrinth of Manehattan. From here I could see another Ministry Hub building which was considerably worse for wear, Horseshoe Tower, and even The Pony of Friendship out in the harbor. Breathtaking blue oceans stretched out until the waters vanished under offshore fog.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” Homage asked, her voice no longer that of DJ Pon3. “I’m told that statue was a gift from the zebra folk generations before the war.”

I turned to look at her but caught sight of something far off on the horizon that grabbed my attention. A needle-like white tower rose all the way into the clouds. I blinked, realizing I'd seen it before, but not over there. Before, when I'd spotted it in the distance, it was…

I turned to look out in the direction I knew the tower should have been and saw. There were two of them. I pulled out my binoculars and slowly turned, scanning the horizon. Far off, protruding from the mountains near old Appleloosa, I thought I spotted a third.

How many of those towers were there?

"I see you've spotted them," Homage said casually.

I lowered the binoculars. "What are they?"

"No idea," Homage admitted. "Something pre-war and really sophisticated. What I do know is that each one has a station house at the base and observation eyes about a third of the way up. DJ Pon3 managed to hack into one of them. Between those eyes and reports from loyal listeners, every DJ Pon3 since had been able to keep ponies informed about dangers, uplifted by the tales of heroes, and generally appraised of what goes on in the wasteland. And give them beautiful music to help make life out there more bearable.

"It's all I can do to help everyone. But I figure the most I can do is the least I can do."

I looked to Homage with amazement bordering on reverence.

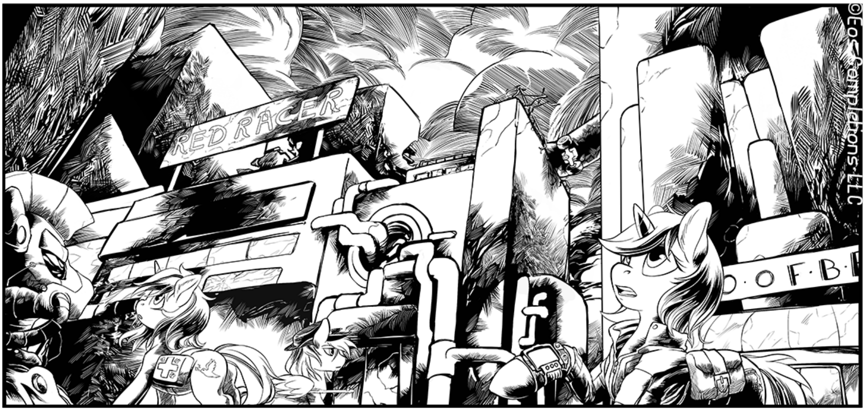
"You, on the other hoof, it seems can do a lot more. And so I'd like your help…"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: How We Do It Down on the Farm – In combat, your critical hits are more devastating. Your damage from critical hits, including Sneak Attack Criticals, is increased by 50%. This does not affect the chance to cause a critical hit.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Villain of the Piece



"Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts."

Answers.

For weeks, I had been holding onto the illusion that all my questions would be answered if only I could get to Tenpony Tower and talk to DJ Pon3.

Sitting across from Homage at her tiny table, talking over ice-cold Sparkle~Colas, I found myself wondering how I had convinced myself. For instance, she hadn't been able to tell me anything about Red Eye; apparently his operations were in one of the few places she couldn't look. If anything, Homage had more questions than I did. By the time I had finished giving her the inside story on what had really happened at Shattered Hoof and why I had made the choices that I did, the only real revelation was the realization that hanging all your hopes on an assumption was going to get you nothing but hurt.

"Thank you, Littlepip," Homage said, offering me another slice of watermelon fresh from the tin can. "I always tell it to my listeners as accurately as my resources allow me to. You have no idea how grateful I am to have somepony fill in the gaps."

I nodded. "And I'm grateful for the chance to tell my side of the story. My… reputation seems to be getting out of control."

Homage smiled, "Undeservedly?" She pointed a hoof at me. "You might not think of the things you do as anything special, but they are. Simply by treating the way you risk yourself to help others as something anypony would do, you show the wasteland a way to be better."

Homage lifted a slice of centuries-preserved watermelon in her hooves and nibbled at it before continuing. "You're right; that's how ponies *should* treat each other. But in the Equestrian Wasteland, it's rare enough for a pony to be willing to expend valuable ammunition from afar to rescue a stranger, especially when they know that they might need those bullets tomorrow to save themselves or their families. Putting life and limb in danger?"

Homage shook her head sadly. She had a beautiful mane of short blue hair that fell into her face as she did so. I reached up to brush it out of her eyes so she didn't have to put down her watermelon. "I'm afraid the Equestrian Wasteland has no shortage of Monterey Jacks, but faces a crippling lack of Littlepips."

⁂

"Why would he do that?" I paced in frustration. The mention of Monterey Jack had derailed the previous conversation. "I just don't understand it."

Homage watched, surprised at my agitation. "Pride would be my guess. From what you've said, he doesn't really seem sorry about what he did."

"It's a stupid law," I asserted with a stomp of my hoof.

Homage didn't seem to agree. "Tenpony Tower has extremely strict laws regarding anything that falls under 'raider activity' to act as a deterrent. Try to remember, we're stuck between the raiders of Shattered Hoof and the slavers of the Fillydelphia Crater. Tenpony doesn't just want to keep undesirables out, they want to send a clear message to anypony from either group that might think of setting hoof near this place."

Dammit. I hated to admit it, but that made sense. What still didn't make sense to me was why Monterey Jack had confessed. The hope that Monterey Jack would be set free because he hadn't been a *successful* bandit wilted.

I stopped and looked to Homage, "He… he had to have known about…" I felt unsure, like I was grasping at straws. And worse, I felt responsible. As Homage had pointed out early in the conversation, Monterey Jack was the one who tried to rob me, and he was the one who made the damning confession. As far as she saw, I had no reason to feel guilty. But that didn't change how I felt. The moment I had seen Monterey, all the feelings of betrayal flooded back laced with righteous indignation. And I had thrown a tantrum. "Was there any chance he didn't know that they could execute him for… what he admitted?"

Homage shook her head. "Every citizen of Tenpony knows the laws here. Getting permanent residence here takes a lot, and knowing the law is one of the easier requirements to meet." I groaned inwardly, confused and upset. Homage added firmly, "Monterey Jack's had that cheese shop here for five years now, and before that he was a caravan guard for the merchants that the former shop owner got his supplies from. Monterey knows the law."

Dammit.

⁂

Homage and I walked together through Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum. Every wall was covered with shelves, save for a couple reading nooks and three large, vaulted windows that allowed cloud-greyed noonday light to spill into the library. Each shelf was filled with tomes, manuals, novels and collected volumes of written works. Every pillar was ringed with more books. There was a large table in the center, standing not on legs but a ring of bookshelves. Each chair had spaces under the armrests filled with even more books. Under the windows was a bed with neither books nor shelves, one of the scattered pieces of furniture (along with the table, refrigerator, chairs and an old phonograph) that told me this was where Homage had made her home.

"That's… a lot of books."

Homage trotted over to the table where an ancient terminal sat, pouring out its green glow through a haze of dust. The pretty grey unicorn poked at it with a hoof and an elegant voice floated out.

> *"Twilight, darling. We really must get together soon. It's been ages. And, may I speak honestly? You need a rest. If any pony knows overworking herself, it would be me. Please, why don't you just take a morning off? Join Fluttershy and myself this week. We'll even make the trip to Manehattan; no need to come back to Canterlot. I'm sure they have lovely spas in Manehattan too.*
>
> *"Now, the reason I'm calling on the restricted line: I've just heard my Ministry is about to purge the Ponyville Library of ideologically incompatible books, and I knew right away that you'd want to keep them for yourself. So I'm having this shipment diverted to you as well. I do hope you have enough room. I know the Ministry of Magic on Ministry Walk has a much bigger library, but we can't get away with diverting these wagons to Canterlot, now can we?*
>
> *"If you are running out of space… now don't get mad… but you could ask Pinkie Pie for help. Her Ministry has a hub in Manehattan too, after all. And she always seems to find enough space for everything. I don't know how she does it.*
>
> *"Anyway, I'm sorry to cut this short, but I've got to run. The designs for the covers of the revised books are ready, and I just can't let them go to the printers without making sure each one is perfect."*

I looked from Homage to the shelves with new respect. Not only a lot of books, but a lot of preserved, original versions of books.

Homage glanced up to one of the few walls that were only mostly covered in books. Above the bookshelf was a framed painting (depicting a panoramic view of a desolate valley of dirt and rocks) and sitting on the shelf was a small clock of wood and brass. The big hoof was already halfway between the eight and the one, the small hoof jabbed straight down at the four. "I'm sorry, but I really have to get back to the radio. There are reports to go through, and I have to check if the screens caught anything. But please, feel free to stay here and browse the books until I get back. I'd love to talk some more… if you don't have anyplace pressing to be."

I did not and said as much, although I knew I should probably let my companions know what I was up to. I excused myself, promising to be right back. As I started to leave the Athenaeum, I remembered the records. Turning to Homage, I pulled them out and floated them towards her. She stared with wide eyes, like a birthday pony realizing that one of her presents was just the right size for that toy she had been begging for.

"I found these in one of the Stables," I said, trying not to break into a huge grin at her expression. "I thought you might find a good use for them."

She bounced up and down, letting out a squee of delight. For the first time since the cheese shop, I felt happy with myself.

Homage's horn glowed as she took possession of the records. "You have no idea how much this means! Not just to me, but to Equestria!"

I was smiling brightly as I rode the elevator back down to my floor.

⁂

I was still feeling happy as I trotted up to the door of our suite. But the voices inside stopped me cold.

"…doctor here says he has a treatment that can remedy addictions," Velvet Remedy was claiming. I felt the happiness drain from me, replaced with crossness. Seriously, they were talking about this? Behind my back? They'd even talked to a *doctor* about it? A stranger, no less?

"What, like jus' givin' Li'lpip a pill?" Calamity's dubious voice erased any question that they were indeed talking about me. "Swallow this an' all yer problems go away?"

"Oh no," Velvet Remedy replied. "First, it's more… involved than that. And will take the better part of the day. Second, Doctor Helpinghoof was clear that the treatment only cleaned the patient's body of the drug and reversed *physical* addiction. The psychological elements of addiction will probably be with Littlepip for the rest of her life. But this will make it a lot easier for her."

I raised my hoof to stomp it in fury. But then set it down, not wanting them to hear. There were so many things wrong with this! First, how dare they?! Second, what addiction? Easier how? I was perfectly fine. I hadn't had a Party-Time Mint-al in what, two days? What kind of addict can say that? And three… "Helpinghoof"? *Really?*

"Ah'm not so sure 'bout this…" Thank you, Calamity. Now tell her to fuck off.

Instead, he neighed, "Li'lpip don't exactly handle feelin's of betrayal well. Ah've seen her reactions to the Stables we've been in…"

"Oh yes. And that's nothing compared to the way she flew off at the cheese shop owner," Velvet Remedy agreed. Perfect. So was that what she was doing when I asked her to look into the laws and Monterey Jack's impending execution? Talking to doctors about problems they're both pretending I have?

"…We'll have to be very careful in how we approach this," Velvet Remedy was continuing with her absurdity. "Even if we can get Littlepip treated, it won't do any good if we lose her because of it. Without friends, who will help her from just taking…"

That was enough. I was headed back to the library. If Velvet Remedy and Calamity didn't know where I was and got worried, well, they deserved it.

⁂

Homage was a gracious hostess, which I was especially grateful for since I had no urge to see Velvet Remedy or Calamity anytime soon. The pretty grey unicorn helped me find a few books I was interested in, then left me to read as she disappeared up into the broadcast station.

For the next few hours, I pored over the original editions of the *Big Book of Arcane Sciences* and *Today's Locksmith,* doing comparative readings with the copies I already owned, making notes, and learning quite a lot about both subjects. Apparently, making books "ideologically compatible" also involved removing the sorts of advanced information that could inspire troublemakers. I smiled a little, realizing that the cutie-mark questing activities of my youth would have definitely put me in the "troublemaker" category.

Homage trotted into the Twilight Sparkle Athenaeum a little over two hours later; floating alongside her were the records and an old phonograph that I had spotted before. While I read, she sat and listened to the music, her head bobbing softly to the beats.

Only once was my study interrupted. Homage got about halfway through a rather energetic song (about mending friendships, notably – the assertion in the chorus that life without friends, quite bluntly, *sucked* struck home pointedly enough that I wasn't able to focus on my reading anyway). Suddenly, Homage stopped the song and restarted it from the beginning. The thought crossed my mind that maybe she was feeling a connection to the lyrics as well, but it was erased with her proclamation:

"Okay, okay. I can't just listen to this song. I have to dance to it."

I looked up and nodded politely. Then started reading again.

"Oh no," she stomped. "I'm not going to dance in front of a guest who isn't dancing herself. That would be way too awkward." The whisper of a thought had barely begun to form in my head when she obliterated it with, "So get up."

My head shot up, startled. The song didn't really make me feel like dancing, no matter how bizarrely upbeat the music was in connection to the lyrics; and I felt awkwardly shy about displaying my complete lack of dancing skills in front of Homage. But I didn't have it in me to say no to her, especially considering that this library was her home and I had given her this gift.

So… we danced.

And while it was awkward at first, Homage wasn't much of a dancer either, making up for lack of skill with creative vigor. Her smile and energy were infectious, and I found myself letting go. By the end of the song I was really enjoying myself, and I felt a twinge of sadness when the song ended.

The next song was much slower, and for a moment I felt awkward, but I distracted both of us by asking about the painting above the clock.

"That's a painting of Splendid Valley," Homage stated, wiping her hair out of her face.

I lifted an eyebrow. "It doesn't *look* splendid."

"Oh it isn't. It's a terrible place. Makes camping in the Everfree Forest look as inviting as a day at the spa." Homage put a hoof on my shoulder. "Stay well away."

I had never heard of Splendid Valley, much less had any desire to go near there. But that made me wonder, "Why would Twilight Sparkle have a painting of such a place in her library?" I felt marginally foolish for asking – certainly it wasn't terrible before the war. On the other hoof, it certainly wasn't splendid, or even pretty. It was barren and uninviting. And the painting didn't fit with the rest of the Athenaeum, neither in palette nor in mood. It was like an unwanted visitor.

"There's a Ministry of Magic facility out there," Homage answered.

"Not a hub like this," Homage clarified. "There's a huge network of caves and caverns under Splendid Valley. Early after the Ministry's inception, the M.A.S. cleared the natives out of those caverns and set up a gem mining operation out there. After they had cleaned the valley of gems, they started using the empty caverns as a disposal site for some of the… by-products of the Ministry's magical experiments."

My mind conjured up images of monsters and grotesqueries. Homage seemed to sense the direction of my imagination and kindly redirected it. “Barrels full of weird magical toxins. In the last months of the war, the Ministry of Magic was apparently retooling the facility for something else, but I don’t think they ever finished. Splendid Valley was center of the second megaspell hit. Most ponies… well, those who bother to learn about history at all… believe that Manehattan was the second. But Splendid Valley was hit minutes before.”

I made a note to avoid. Weird magical toxins and megaspell radiation probably did not mix well.

* * *

The afternoon was bleeding into evening; Homage had returned to the broadcast station to take on the guise of DJ Pon3. This time I followed, watching her transform both in voice and mannerisms as she stepped to the mike.

“…and it’s time for another DJ Pon3 pony survival tip. Today I want to talk to you about two of the biggest threats you might stumble across in the Equestrian Wasteland. No, not radigators, bloodwings or even hellhounds. No, children, today I want to talk to you about their mothers. That’s right, pull up a chair, cuz it’s time for DJ Pon3 to talk to you about the dangers of radiation and taint…”

There was something amazing about watching this equally little unicorn pony become the voice of the Equestrian Wasteland.

“…Magical radiation, as we all know, is a side effect of powerful and wicked magics released violently on Equestria. Naturally, the biggest and worst zones of radiation are found in places like the Fillydelphia Crater, the Manehattan city center… pretty much everywhere the megaspells hit except for Cloudsdayle and Canterlot (both of which should be avoided for *other* reasons). But even a recently exploded skywagon can be radioactive. Fortunately, so long as you always carry your radiation detectors, kids, these places can be avoided.

“The more insidious threat of radiation is that it bleeds into food and water. Always drink purified water whenever you can. Make sure you carry several canteens whenever you travel, and fill them at every safe water supply. Keep a healthy supply of RadAway…”

Most of this I already knew, thanks to the Wasteland Survival Guide, so I was only half-listening. I had to admit that, despite Monterey Jack and the stupidity of my friends, this had been one of the better days of my life. But it was getting late and my anger towards Velvet and Calamity, while still very present, had dulled around the edges. It was time to return to them.

“…Taint, on the other hoof, is a zebra of very different stripes. Nopony knows exactly what the taint is or where it comes from, but we know its mutative effects on monsters and the fatally malignant repercussions on ponies. Remember, folks: taint don’t care what you’re wearing. No protective suit keeps it out. And there’s no cure. Only way to safely tell if a place is tainted is by reputation. Discover one by any other means, it’s probably too late …”

Sounded to me like the best way to hide something was to stick it in a cave and hang a sign saying “Danger: Taint” outside.

“And in the news, one of the smaller settlements in the Manehattan Ruins, Gutterville, has gone silent. If anypony is traveling through that way, please pop a head in and see what’s going on. Then let your ol’ pal DJ Pon3 know.”

Eventually, DJ Pon3 wrapped up the news with a special announcement:

“Now, I know what all of you are actually wondering: what about that Equestrian heroine from Stable Two? What’s she up to?”

I winced, giving Homage a pleading look. But asking her to tone it down when she was being DJ Pon3 was like asking SteelHooves to take off his armor – it just wasn’t going to happen.

“Well, I’ve got incredible news: the Stable Dweller loves you! That’s right, all of you! And you know how I know?…”

I was cringing now.

“…because she sent a little toaster repairpony to me with a special delivery. Starting tomorrow, there will be some new songs added to our broadcast. So keep yourselves tuned in, faithful listeners, because you don’t want to be the last pony around to have heard the discs I’ll be spinnin’ for you tomorrow! And now, once again, it’s Sapphire Shores singing that the sun can’t hide forever.”

The glow of DJ Pon3’s horn’s horn faded, and once again I was in the room with Homage.

“Laying it on a little thick aren’t you?”

Homage smiled brightly. “Just telling the truth like I always do.”

I laughed. “Well, except for the whole secret identity gimmick.”

Homage fixed me with a serious look. “Do you think the stuck up ponies of Tenpony Tower like the idea of having a ghoul sympathizer living in their tower? Much less broadcasting from it? If they knew who I was, then I wouldn’t have the freedom to tell it like it is. In fact, they would probably ban me from the tower altogether.”

“Sometimes,” she said, “being honest means knowing when not to be.”

* * *

There were two things left that I wanted to ask Homage, and only one which I could bring myself to voice, so when we returned from the broadcast station I finally brought it up.

“This morning, you said you needed my help?”

Homage blushed. “Well, was kind of hoping you’d risk your life on an errand for me, but it’s a bit ridiculous of me to ask now.”

I raised an eyebrow, my curiosity piqued. “Go ahead.”

The remarkable grey unicorn with the blue mane that kept falling into her eyes seemed to ponder that, then shook her head.

“Tell me,” I nudged.

“um… I’d rather not. It’s silly now.”

“Tell me,” I pushed, her refusal making me even more curious.

Maddeningly, she declined.

I stopped a little. “Tell me. Tell me. Tell me!”

Homage waved a hoof. “Okay, okay. Since you really want to know…” She took a deep breath. Then let it all out in a rush. “I want you to get some new songs for me. Specific songs. I know that Sweetie Belle was really close with the other two founders of Stable-Tec, one of whom was Scootaloo. And Scootaloo also founded Red Racer, whose office and factory is right here in Manehattan. I came across information a few years ago that told me Scootaloo’s office safe should still contain a few demos for music that have never been heard before. I’ve been wanting to get them and listen to them ever since. But I can’t because it’s really dangerous. The place is just lousy with manticores.”

Wow. Okay, yes, I could definitely see why Homage would consider that a silly request, considering the records. And she didn’t even know about Velvet Remedy yet.

Which reminded me that I had to return to Velvet Remedy and Calamity, the friends who had been skulking around behind my back, and tell them I had no better idea what to do next than I had before we got here. I needed a distraction. And, really, it was for a good cause. Not to mention I really wanted to see Homage’s face light up again.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

Homage was staring at the floor, digging at it with her hoof. At my words, her head shot up, staring at me with disbelief. “W-why?” she stammered.

I considered trying to make my reasoning sound more noble, or falsifying it all together. But a bigger part of me felt that lies had no place in DJ Pon3’s domain. So instead, I told her, “Because I have no idea what to do next. And my companions are expecting me to come back with a plan. And, really, because you asked me to.” Gilding my words just a little, I added, “I would love to do Homage a favor.”

She blinked. “Okay, did you miss the part about the manticores?”

I chuckled. “No. But I’ve gotten a few new weapons since the last time we fought one. I think we can manage. And don’t worry,” I added, not wanting her to feel guilty, “if it looks too dangerous, we’ll back out.”

Homage nodded firmly, accepting this. Which caused her hair to fall into her face again. “Okay. But if you’re going to do something that risky for me, you’re not doing it without a reward. And I know just the thing!”

I cocked my head, not really looking for a reward and ready to decline her offer, but too curious to refuse without hearing it.

“I’ve heard that your friend Calamity has been asking around for a flux regulator. Well, I just happen to have one.”

* * *

I wasn’t sure I really wanted us to have a flux regulator. The idea of traveling around in a pegasus-pulled bomb had dubious appeal.

Before returning to my companions, I made one other stop. I suspected Velvet Remedy had been less than diligent in pursuing the situation with Monterey Jack (considering she’d been seeing doctors about me instead), but I knew I should give her the benefit of the doubt. And from what I had learned myself, Velvet Remedy may have hit a wall very early.

On either hoof, I needed to talk to Monterey Jack myself before making further plans, especially if those plans were going to amount to leaving him to his fate. Unfortunately, the Tenpony Tower constables weren't about to let a little non-citizen like me anywhere near him.

Not a problem.

A blast of mint flavor later, and the world exploded to vivid lucidity. Talking my way past the guardbucks was easy. I was a charming, intelligent mare; even if I had no interest in them, they naturally had interest in me. I was even able to talk one of them into giving me his pencil and clipboard. Which was great, because now that my mind was freed from its natural sluggishness, I was having *ideas!*

The flux regulator was going to be an astounding benefit. After finishing up business in Tenpony Tower, we would go back and fix up the Sky Bandit. Maybe take a trip back home to Junction R-7 for a little equipment maintenance and inventory housekeeping. Then we should be able to go straight to Fillydelphia, bypassing all the dangers along the way…

"What do you want?" The sour voice of Monterey Jack cut through my preoccupation with my Party-Time-enhanced brilliance. I looked up to find him standing in a bed of moldy hay at the back of an iron-barred cell.

I refocused on where I was and why I was here. Staring at the unpleasant beige stallion, I cut to the chase, "Why in Celestia's name did you admit what you'd done? You knew you'd be jailed and probably killed for it."

Monterey Jack fixed me with a cool stare. And finally, as if speaking to a child, "Because the Equestrian Wasteland demands sacrifices. You haven't been out here long enough to get that…" He looked me over. "But I'm guessing you've started to. Not the innocent little filly you were just three weeks ago, are you? You've killed. And not just monsters, you've killed other ponies. Tell me, when you stepped out of that Stable, were you a killer?

I stepped back, shocked. I had no idea what this had to do with anything, but I knew what he was saying. I saw it in the way Velvet Remedy looked at me, like I was flank-deep in blood. The way I saw myself in dark times and bad dreams.

"I know you've looted corpses. How about stealing from raiders or other ponies who are so bad, who the wasteland's made so twisted and mean that it's easy to justify pretty much anything you do to them? How about stealing from those who it is harder to justify taking from… or is it just easy now to take from everypony?" Monterey Jack's words stirred up memories of breaking into Silver Bell's barn.

"You betrayed anypony yet? Left anypony to die just to save your own skin? Killed an innocent yet because it was the only way to protect you and your own?" He stared at me, reading the revulsion in my eyes. "No? How about lesser things. Ever just walked away?"

My mind flashed to the blue pony being chased down by her rapists. But that didn't count! We'd saved her life. Calamity had even brought her healing potions. It wasn't as if we just left her to her fate. We helped! …and then we left her. Velvet Remedy, I realized with PTM-laced insight, would never have let us walk away without seeing the girl safely home had she not been traumatized by the sight of Calamity slaying the colt. But why didn't *I* insist that? What was wrong with me?

Monterey Jack was waiting. The only response I managed was a nod. I wasn't nodding to any of his questions specifically, but that I followed what he was saying.

"The Equestrian Wasteland demands sacrifices. It makes you whittle away bits of yourself until you can't recognize you anymore. So you find a virtue. You find something in yourself that you believe in, that you do not compromise. Ever. And as long as you can keep that part of you, that one good thing, then you can bear to look at yourself in the mirror each morning. It becomes your anchor, the thing that lets you live with yourself.

"My virtue, my anchor, is that I'm an honest pony. I keep to my word. I have never cheated a customer. I do not lie. And as long as I can look at myself and know that I'm still an honest pony, then I can bear everything I've ever had to do to provide a safe place for my filly and colts."

"But…" I stared at him, not wanting to understand. "You could have said nothing!"

He glared, "For how long? I come back, and you're all over the damn radio. My children listen every day for news of your Celestia-damned heroism. They idolize the fuck out of you. And every day, I know that I've met their idol and I tried to rob her. And I keep silent, but a lie of omission is still a lie. And that poison has been killing me as surely as any noose."

Eyes narrowing, he leaned his muzzle against the bars, as close to me as he could get. "Don't think I spoke up for you. I spoke up to save *me.* Even if it kills me."

I backed up. I wasn't sure if Monterey Jack was cracked, foolish… or terribly, horribly sane. I turned to go.

As I moved out through the door, he called out after me. "If you haven't found your own virtue yet, you best hurry up. While there's still anything left of you to save."

* * *

I was still running on the awesomeness of Party-Time Mint-als when I finally returned to the others. So convincing them to join me in a hunt for music had been a breeze. (I had been concerned about a confrontation; but when I arrived, Velvet Remedy was lost in the Flutteryshy Orb, giving me a chance to talk to the others first.) Calamity was in the moment I mentioned the flux regulator. I phrased it to Velvet Remedy as a chance to impress DJ Pon3 and maybe get to record some of her own music. She reminded me that she was a medical pony now, not some Stable's songbird, but it was a half-hearted reluctance that I was able to overcome by suggesting this would allow her beautiful music to fly free. SteelHooves took no persuasion at all, neither eager nor reluctant.

The Red Racer factory was nowhere near either the Luna or Celestia Lines, so within half an hour, we were walking through the urban blight of the Manehattan Ruins. The crash from the Mint-als was worse than before, and the only thing that kept me from chomping another one was a promise to myself that I would the moment we got to Red Racer. I couldn't fight like this, stupid and half-blind. I needed that edge. And if I took another one now, I ran the risk of crashing in the middle of combat. I couldn't risk that.

I dropped back to walk alongside SteelHooves, noticing how Calamity and Velvet Remedy unconsciously changed their paces to put distance between each other. I rolled my eyes. They were bad enough before. Depression was setting in, and their stupid silent fight wasn't helping.

"So… why are you still with us?" I asked SteelHooves in what I hoped was not a blunt or discouraging tone. "You escorted us to Tenpony Tower already."

"Do you want me to leave?" the deep voice spoke from within the Steel Ranger's armor.

I waved a hoof. “No, no, I didn’t say that. I just… I like to know why a pony like yourself would continue to travel with me.”

“Maybe I have nothing better to do.”

I stared ahead, not believing that at all. Why would he lie though? It seemed like all my companions were on the edge of turning on me. Was I being paranoid? Or was SteelHooves a threat?

Buried in dark contemplation, I didn’t notice that the others ahead of me had stopped. I bumped into Calamity’s backside, scraping his barding with my horn.

“Hey. Why…?” I started to ask, annoyed, but the words fell away from my mouth as my eyes were drawn to a large poster on a freestanding, crumbled wall.

The poster was of a pegasus fully encased in sleek black armor. The armor looked fearsome, almost insectoid. The battle saddle looked like an onyx carapace with two antennae jutting out, tips crackling with magical green energy. Like SteelHooves, even the pegasus’ tail was protected by segmented armor; but unlike Steel Ranger armor, this tail also served as a weapon, ending in a vicious, glowing spike. I felt I was seeing a nightmare version of Steel Ranger armor. Beneath the pegasus, who hovered in a most threatening stance, were scattered zebras, dead or fleeing.

FEAR NOT, EQUESTRIA!
WE WILL SAVE YOU!

Calamity finally nickered, scoffing. “That’s right. One day, the Grand Pegasus Enclave will come swoopin’ down outta the skies t’ rescue all y’all little ponies. Maybe after they’re done with their naps.”

He leaned close and whispered loudly. “Don’t hold yer breath. Never. Gonna. Happen.”

“Calamity…?” Velvet Remedy began, seeming to forget she was mad at him.

Turning away from the poster in disgust, he began trotting off. “Lazy. Arrogant. It’s like they took the greatest of us, stripped away everything t’was good an’ admirable ’till they were left with nothin’ but her flaws, and decided ’hey, let’s go with that!’”

* * *

“I think we’re being followed,” SteelHooves announced as we passed through a broken courtyard, approaching a towering building black and half-eaten by the apocalyptic blast. I was staring at my PipBuck’s automapping spell; the Red Racer factory should be directly in front of us. At the Steel Ranger’s words, I turned around, eyes moving to my E.F.S. compass, more confident in it than my own eyesight in the waning light.

The courtyard was covered in wind-blown litter; scraggly grass burst through cracks in the grey stonework. I looked out past the platform that formed the centerpiece of the courtyard; a platform that had once boasted statues of several ponies. The statues had shattered and crumbled; now only the hooves of the ponies remained, sticking grotesquely up from the surface of the dais. I turned, taking in a full view of our surroundings until I was looking back at SteelHooves and the inferno-torn building that towered above us. But neither I nor my Eyes-Forward Sparkle detected anything. This time.

I was certain SteelHooves was right. Several times earlier I'd spotted it too, something which was probably a small miracle with how murky all my senses felt. But no, there was somepony or something hovering on the edge of the Sparkle's ability to detect. The light on my compass labeled it as non-hostile, leaving me to wonder if it was keeping its distance out of shyness, or because it comprehended the limits of my Stable-Tec arcano-technology.

As if on cue, a notice flashed across the upper edge of my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. I had discovered "Hoofbeats". I turned back to look at the building again, eyeing it with surprise. I knew what this skyscraper had once been: this was the Ministry of Morale's Manehattan hub. I'd seen it from the roof of Tenpony Tower. Yet sure enough, the façade before us proclaimed itself (in sheer audacity of style as well as neon lettering) to be the center of loud, musical urban rebellion.

Unlike the Ministry of Magic's local hub, the Ministry of Morale didn't announce itself with signs along the Celestia Line or even a name in small font somewhere on the wall. It was a nameless, faceless skyscraper. Unassumingly monolithic from the third floor up. The first two floors, however, were dedicated to what I had already come to think of as one of Manehattan's most popular dance clubs (remembering Velvet Remedy's passing acknowledgement that Pinkie Pie and Vinyl Scratch had performed music together at Hoofbeats at least once.) Even my PipBuck didn't label it as a Ministry hub, as if it was a secret… but one that everypony already knew.

In its time, the Ministry of Magic's hub had been exactly what I expected of a Ministry building, down to the insane magical defenses that protected it from the balefire bomb. From the MoM hub's apparent lack of defenses to its perch atop a public party-house, this was assuredly not.

I walked forward, drawn to the gaping, shattered-glass front of Hoofbeats. I tried to imagine it full of ponies, dancing to that song which Velvet Remedy had started to sing on stage at Shattered Hoof. As I trotted past Calamity and Velvet, a red light appeared on my E.F.S. and then a second. And a third. I stopped, waving for them to hold back. Crouching down, I moved along the front of Hoofbeats until I reached the corner where the sidewalk was littered with the burnt metal husks of magazine venders.

Several more dots appeared as I peeked cautiously around the corner.

Did you miss the part about the manticores?

The Red Racer factory was literally right across a back alley from Hoofbeats. The red and orange bulks of manticores roamed all over the facility. I watched as several took off from a terrace twelve stories up and began to circle the building before one-by-one landing on new perches. There were two of them in the back alley alone, one had its back to me, its tail inches from my muzzle. The other was digging through a trash bin further down.

I cringed back around the corner and shot the others a distressed expression. They all stared back at me expectantly. It was mere luck that there weren't any in the courtyard. I suspected I now knew what had happened to the pony statues.

Luna guide me. Now what? Think. Think…

What I needed was another Party-Time Mint-al. I was sure that with just a chew, the burst of reasoning and perception would solve the problem. But after the behavior of my companions, I couldn't risk them seeing me take another. They wouldn't understand.

I turned away, trying to block their view as I activated my PipBuck's inventory arrangement spell and then floated the tin out. I kept my head down and hoped the light from my horn wasn't bright enough for them to notice in the odd grey twilight of dusk. I levitated one PTM out and sucked it greedily into my mouth.

As expected, the taste was delicious and I had no more than swallowed, slipping the tin away, when the grey film was pulled from my eyes and the world was so much brighter and better. I took another peek around the corner, even more cautiously this time. The manticore had not seemed to move. Even its tail was in almost the same position. His companion dropped down from the trash bin and wandered over to the next.

I looked up into the sky. I was smart enough to handle two manticores. No problem. But even like this, I couldn't possibly handle the whole herd. I had considered having Calamity fly us up to one of the ledges, but the manticores could fly too. They were heavy, lumbering creatures, and never seemed to fly very high, but…

My eye caught something red in the sky above. Something that wasn't a manticore. Not at all.

Red Racer was a factory that made, amongst other things, scooters. It was, from what I could tell, best known for its little red scooters. And clearly Red Racer was quite proud of them, for the factory had once been adorned by a gigantic red scooter over ten yards long. The giant, symbolic scooter was no longer perched on its rooftop scaffolding. The scaffolding had rusted and collapsed; the scooter had fallen and gotten wedged between the Ministry of Morale and the Red Racer factory about fifteen stories up.

Creating a bridge.

I knew how to get into the Red Racer factory.

* * *

"You really are crazy," SteelHooves finally commented after hearing the plan. Velvet Remedy was giving me looks, as if staring at me hard enough would explain to her the change in my mood.

"That there's a might big and unstable-lookin' buildin', Li'lpip. Ah think maybe we best split inta pairs t' try an' find the best way up. Otherwise, it'll take us forever."

I agreed. Not only did I want to move swiftly so that my PTM wouldn't wear off before we got up and across, I really didn't think the floors in that building should be stressed with the weight of more than two of us at a time. Especially when one of those was SteelHooves.

"I'll go with SteelHooves. I'm the lightest, and I can use levitation when necessary."

Velvet Remedy took one look at Calamity and interjected, "No! I… I should go with you and SteelHooves should go with Calamity. He flies. No weight at all."

Calamity nickered and rolled his eyes. "Whatever ya want, princess. So, Ranger, fancy a bit o' scavenging?"

"Not as long as you're carrying," SteelHooves stated plainly and followed Calamity through one of the nearly glassless frames of Hoofbeats. Velvet Remedy stuck her nose in the air, pairing up with me as we followed.

As we stepped into the darkness, Velvet Remedy focused, lighting up her horn. The first thing I noticed was a gumball machine. The gumballs inside had melted and boiled, and were now a solid block inside the warped housing.

The center arena of Hoofbeats was three stories of mezzanines over a dance floor that took up most of the basement. The musician's platform had once been hung from the ceiling by cables. Now it lay at a wild tilt, one end smashed through the dance floor like a ship beginning to sink.

"Is it bad that I'm jealous of this place and the ponies who got to perform here?" Velvet Remedy asked me as we passed under rows of hanging speakers, each larger than a full-grown stallion. "Or that I feel so upset to see it destroyed like this?"

I shook my head. "Just because your dream is to be a medical pony doesn't mean you didn't love singing any less." Somehow, I just knew the words were right. It must have been the insight and social graces that PTMs granted a pony, for I wasn't sure I could have understood what was bothering her on my own. "You're not cheating on your dreams or your freedom to long to sing."

Velvet Remedy paused. Then whinnied, smiling. "Thank you, Littlepip."

I smiled back, sidestepping a charred skeleton. Then stopped, looking at it. Unlike the streets outside, where the ponies were vaporized in a flash, the ones in here were burned alive. I winced, trying not to imagine rushing flames tearing through the dance club, a flood of fire. I realized that the Ministry of Morale hub must have had protections of its own, but just not as magically strong as those around the Ministry run by Twilight Sparkle. They must have held just a moment, probably only for an eye-blink, before they failed. The inferno that consumed this place was no less final a holocaust.

* * *

The balefire bomb the zebras set off in the heart of Manehattan was detonated in the late morning. The population of Hoofbeats was probably at its lowest ebb for the whole day. The same could not be said for the Ministry above. I focused my own magic to plow a path through the blackened pony skeletons that covered much of the floors.

Red dots speckled my E.F.S. compass. Foalishly, my first thought was of the ghosts that the merchant pony with the mechanical owl had told us about. In a way, I wasn't entirely far off.

"Who?" demanded the little robot owl as it soared into the hallway. I froze. Not in fear but utter astonishment. Hostile robot security owls? Really?

The mechanical owl opened its beak, and a thin line of pink magical energy sliced the air, striking a smoke-blackened vase on a magazine counter next to me. The vase flew backwards, glowing fiercely pink, and disintegrated into a fine glowing ash before it could hit the floor.

So yes, really.

I heard Calamity's battle saddle firing somewhere else on the floor. I slid my combat shotgun from its holster, floating the muzzle towards the mechanical bird and nearly shot Velvet Remedy as she charged in front of me, spearing the metal creature through with her horn.

I felt myself trembling – caught between panic, relief and anger – as Velvet Remedy drew up to a halt, her eyes locked on the now inert robot impaled on her horn She shook her head, trying to dislodge it.

"Littlepip?" she finally said, sounding desperate and looking comical. "A little help please?"

"Only. If you promise. Not to run. In front of a loaded gun again."

She stopped, looking at me with that dead robot owl on her horn, her eyes wide as her gaze fell on my floating shotgun. "Oh dear."

"Oh dear indeed," I said grimly even though my anger was bleeding away. I wrapped the skewered owl with my magic and pulled it free. I wanted to be mad, but she just looked so cute like that.

* * *

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

The bullet tore through the first owl, setting its internal components on fire as it went. Two more passed harmlessly through the air, impacting the kitchen wall beyond with flashes of flame. As the mechanical guardian fell, I switched targets with the practiced perfection of S.A.T.S. Pulling the trigger again, I sent three more bullets at the second owl.

A razor line of pink struck my back, burning painfully, but mercifully not turning me into fine pink dust. Without even waiting to see the second mechanical owl fall, I glided the barrel around to point at the one behind me and telekinetically pulled the trigger again. Three bullets, a foosh of flame, and the third owl fell to the floor ablaze. The air smelled of ozone, burning wiring and bubbling robotic innards.

Exhausted, the targeting spell fell away. I looked around, but I had gotten all of them. I checked the clip on the zebra rifle.

I was quickly using up the armor-piercing ammo that the zebra rifle could use. The weapon didn't seem to have the ability to shoot just one bullet at a time, and it only took one to punch through these creatures. I needed to change weapons, but the combat shotgun had already proven too inaccurate at the ranges I preferred to engage these creatures at. They were easy to kill, but their magical energy weapons had a chance, even if slim, of disintegrating anything they hit. I didn't want them to get close enough to have a good shot.

I suspected Little Macintosh had more than enough power to punch through the metal skin of these things without using armor-piercing ammunition. Which was good since Little Macintosh was the only weapon that I didn't have armor-piercing ammo for. (Other than the dart gun, which was completely useless against these little things.)

Switching weapons, I started towards the wall of refrigerators, intent on finding out what goodies the Ministry of Morale had packed with an eternity's worth of preservatives on this floor. Every other floor of the MoM hub had a kitchen, even if it was just a small one. There were more kitchens than bathrooms, which I couldn't imagine was logistically sane. And some floors like this one were nothing but kitchen. The posters on the walls in here were all brown and flaking, or burned away entirely, but the ones that were just a little readable had me convinced that Pinkie Pie actually made a government industry out of churning out birthday parties for good little fillies and colts. *You were good this* *year, Littlepip. (Trust us, we know!) So here's your cake, sent straight from the Ministry of Morale. With a birthday card signed by Pinkie Pie herself!*

What I imagined was ridiculous and impossible, but I somehow also believed it was actually true.

Velvet Remedy stopped me, insisting on looking at the wound on my back before letting me move another yard. So I sat onto my haunches and stared longingly at the first refrigerator door.

"You and Calamity," Velvet Remedy tut-tutted. "When I dreamed of being a medical pony, it was to spend my life helping ponies. Multiple. Not just two, over and over again."

"You could always just let me OW!" I flinched as she pressed something that stung onto the burn before pouring a pleasantly cool gel over it.

"There, it will be good as new in no time. A little pink, maybe, and it may take a few days for your coat to grow back, but it won't scar." Not like the line left on my neck, she meant.

* * *

"…and just trying to get him to take a bath is like trying to shove an apple through the eye of a needle…" Once Velvet Remedy had gotten onto the topic of Calamity, she just didn't stop. I wanted to cover my ears with my hooves, but I couldn't do that and walk. At least her voice had dropped now, made more timid by the hallway's décor.

We had made it up to one of the many floors that had been dedicated to sifting through the massive amounts of intelligence garnered through having tapped into every "private" conversation transmitted by arcano-technology like the terminals. The Ministry of Morale had been listening.

All along the dark corridor were smoke-blackened posters of Pinkie Pie. They were watching us, the eyes seeming to follow us as we moved. The bold word "FOREVER" glared from the bottom of each poster.

Creepiest. Most disturbing. Hallway. Ever!

I floated out one of the cupcakes we had found in the fridge and took a bite. It was a little stale, but still surprisingly edible after two centuries. Whoever had made them was either a goddess of cooking, or a very dark enchantress.

"…shoots without thinking. Like he shot the dragon before we could even try to talk to it. Like how he shot *you…* "

I was still ignoring her as we reached the end of the hall. Left, right or through the doors ahead? I felt myself beginning to come down from the Party-Time Mint-als. First chance I got, I was taking another. I really couldn't risk crashing in someplace so dark and… freaky. Or, for that matter, around Velvet Remedy when she was being such a…

"Whoa!"

I'd pushed open the doors, and found myself staring into the sky. An office room three times the size of a Stable Atrium spanned out in front of us, filled with rows and rows of desks with terminals, then dropped away into empty space. The sun was just moving down below the cloud-cover, painting the sky an apocalyptic orange. I'd somehow forgotten half the building was gone.

For the first time in weeks, I was hit by massive, crippling vertigo. I'd become accustomed to the hugeness of outside, but to have it suddenly and unexpectedly thrown in my face awoke the agoraphobic filly inside me. Carefully, shaking slightly, I closed the door.

* * *

"…could actually like a brute like him?" Velvet Remedy stopped for a breath. I thanked Celestia for the moment of quiet, viciously praying that she could send Velvet Remedy's voice on a lunar vacation.

By my estimation, we were a floor above where the scooter had gotten caught. Collapsed stairwells had forced us to ascend higher and now we were looking for a way back down.

"It's just that he makes me so… so… mad," Velvet Remedy burst out with a stomp. So much for the power of prayer. "You know, I really think I should reconsider my options. There's plenty of other stallions in the Equestrian Wasteland…"

I felt a pang of jealousy. Started digging a hole to bury it in.

"…Or," Velvet Remedy said with a sudden sweetness. I froze. I could feel her breath on my left ear. When had she gotten so close? With a sultry voice as smooth as melted chocolate, she suggested, "Or maybe a mare?"

I felt my knees go weak. My heart skipped a beat. My insides became flushed with heat and my stomach filled with butterflies.

Then cold hard reality crashed over me, dousing the heat and killing the butterflies with frost. I turned on her, instantly and coldly furious.

"NO."

Velvet Remedy took a surprised step back.

"No. You are too perceptive to *not* know I have a crush on you." I stepped forward, my voice cold and sharp. "You do not get to play with my heart, offer me what I've yearned for, just to try to get back at Calamity."

Velvet Remedy backed up, ears back, stammering.

"For the Goddesses' sake, Remedy!" I barked. "You are a follower of Fluttershy. *You don't get to be that evil.*"

Velvet Remedy's eyes were wide. Her ears were pasted back against her skull and she was cringing from me.

Good.

I turned and walked away, not wanting to look at her again. I left her still standing back there as I turned the corner. Something was tearing apart inside me and I didn't want to let her see it.

"You're not supposed to be here," called out a voice that sounded disturbingly like a mechanical Pinkie Pie. "You've been a bad pony!"

A sprite-bot's grill glowed an angry reddish-pink and it aimed its magical energy weapon at me.

* * *

"Where are they all coming from?" cried out Velvet Remedy as five more sprite-bots rounded the doorway and started vaporizing our barricade of tables and refrigerators.

I knew the answer, but I didn't have time to explain it aloud. It was obvious, really. Before there was Watcher watching everyone, there was Pinkie Pie. Of *course* the sprite-bots were hers. I imagined them floating along the streets of pre-war Ponyville, Appleloosa, Manehattan… ubiquitous. Everywhere. Bobbing along playing cheerful tuba music and all the other happy little nonsense songs that they played. Little ambassadors of good cheer from the Ministry of Morale. Little spies.

I fired off shot after shot, ducking down only to reload. The waves were coming faster now, and there were enough of them that my targeting spell was draining before I could finish them all off. Fortunately, they were easy targets. They didn't seem to understand evasion.

The clarity of PTMs had faded away, leaving my brain sluggish. Every moment not spent aiming and firing was spent hoping for a chance to eat another Mint-al. But with Velvet Remedy crouching right next to me, there was no way to do so. I was still coldly angry with her, and the last thing I wanted to do was give her the satisfaction of seeing something she would interpret as proof she was right.

I did have to wonder why this floor though.

Four more swooped in through the shattered window. I threw a refrigerator at them. Three were crushed by it. The fourth one was knocked away. Beside me, Velvet fired her needler pistol over and over at it. She was a bad shot, but finally hit it. The needle bounced off the armored bot harmlessly.

The bot returned fire, slicing through her mane.

"Fine," she bristled with lady-like resolution. I was surprised to feel the combat shotgun float out of its holder. "Let's try this one."

BLAM!!

The sprite-bot exploded in a shower of sparks.

* * *

The office had, at some point, actually been quite nice. A huge window gave what would once have been a panoramic view of Manehattan. The window was shattered inward, the frame ringed with jagged glass teeth. Four safes, blistered but intact, were built into the wall beside the window. There was a melted desk in front of it.

In the far corner was a small half-kitchen. On the counter, a terminal gave off a soft pink glow. I had never seen one before which didn't glow that sickly apple-green. The casing was warped and charred, and it took some of the special tools I had retrieved from Stable Twenty-Nine just to interface with it, but the screen was still readable.

In the other far corner of the room, opposite the kitchen, was another blackened skeleton of a pony. I was just sitting down to try my hoof at hacking the terminal when I noticed it, and something buried within the bones.

Curious, I got up and trotted over. What I had glimpsed was a spot of color, clean, unmarred by the balefire that engulfed this place. Looking closer, I could see a statuette amongst the long dead pony's ribcage. A young purple unicorn with pink and violet stripes in her lavender hair. Twilight Sparkle.

Gingerly, I floated the statuette out of the ribcage and took a closer look. Immediately, I felt a strange wash of clarity that pushed away the cloud that had settled over my brain. The sensation was nowhere near as powerful as eating a Party-Time Mint-al, nor as flavorful… but I couldn't deny that it felt *cleaner* somehow.

On the base of the statuette: "Be Smart"

Smiling a little, I slipped the statuette away and returned my attention to the terminal.

This one was beyond my skill. Not even with the new tricks of the trade that I had learned from comparative reading was I able to crack it.

"Littlepip…" Velvet Remedy started, approaching me gingerly as I gave up in disgust. "…please, about before…"

I stared at her warningly. "Look, just don't talk about it." Biting back a harsher retort, "In fact, why don't you go stand outside for a little while. I need some fresh air.

I could see her deflate a little more at that. She nodded, saying no more, and walked into the office outside the strangely cupcake-shaped door.

The moment the door swung shut, I floated out my Party-Time Mint-als and swallowed one. I went for the safes first, picking each one easily. And to my joy, the contents of the third safe held dozens of tins of Party-Time Mint-als! I was actually feeling even happier about the find than the two StealthBucks I found in the fourth.

Then I turned my attention to the defiant terminal as my mind soared to new heights of intellect. It took four more times, forcing me to repeatedly back out of the system before it locked down. But I finally got it. I let out a whoop!

"Littlepip?" Velvet Remedy's voice sounded through the door – timid, cautious.

My shoulders slumped. I sighed. Getting up from the terminal, I walked over to the door and opened it. "Okay, look. I know you're sorry. And that you didn't mean it. But it doesn't change the fact that you tried to do it. And that's not going to stop hurting anytime soon."

She nodded, tears in her eyes. I felt bad. Why did I feel bad?

I closed my eyes and sighed again. I was seeing the situation more clearly now. Even though I didn't want to. Party-Time Mint-als were an equal-opportunity revealer. "And for what it's worth, I get it. I know what it's like to put your faith in what you believe something to be rather than what something actually is." I looked for an example that didn't reveal that I had gained effectively no insight from DJ Pon3. I didn't want to admit that yet. And fortunately, it didn't take much for me to find an even better example.

"When I stepped into the outside, I was completely lost. I didn't understand any of it. The only thing I understood was Stables. Or, at least, that's what I assumed. In reality, the only thing I understood was Stable Two. And when the other Stables didn't live up to my expectations, I… couldn't handle it well." I kicked at the floor, stirring up ash. "Hell, it didn't even take all the bizarre and fucked-up social experiments… I get upset when the *architecture* isn't ri… isn't the same. Isn't what *I* think is right."

Velvet Remedy was staring down at me thoughtfully.

"When something, or somepony, doesn't live up to your assumptions of who he is, then you either have to accept that you didn't know him as well as you thought you did, and strive to get to know the real him better… or you start, well…"

"Doing what I'm doing now?" Velvet Remedy offered.

"Yeah." I smiled at her. Then rolled my eyes, "And I am totally the wrong pony to be giving this advice when I can't even manage it myself."

"Thank you, Littlepip," Velvet said earnestly as I disappeared back through the cupcake door to look at the terminal once again.

* * *

There was only one retrievable bit of data on the terminal. An audio message:

> *"Hi Twilight. It's me…*
>
> *"I've tried sending messages to you at both your Canterlot office and the one here. Everypony says that you are in Splendid Valley again, so now I'm trying you there too. I really hope you're not just avoiding me. I… I wouldn't blame you if you were."*

The voice was anxious, sad and cracked. I knew Pinkie Pie's voice; I'd heard it in Vinyl Scratch's memory. This was almost the same, but much more fragile. Possibly even broken.

> *"I went to the get-together at Spike's place and brought It just like you asked. All of my friends were there but you… Spike said it was because you couldn't get away from your work, but… Was it because I was gonna be there?*
>
> *"Twilight, I'm so sorry. You were right. Totally right. I've known it for a long time. I just…*
>
> *"I can't.*
>
> *"I mean, I couldn't. But I will. I've made an appointment at the Helpinghoof Clinic. For tomorrow. They're supposed to have stuff there… medicine that can help make… addictions… go away.*
>
> *"Do you think they might be able to bake the medicine into a cake? Or maybe a pie? I like pie!"*

On the recording I heard the sound of a knock and a door opening. A second voice interrupted.

> *"Miss Pinkie Pie? The Ministry of Wartime Technology has sent us a dozen Steel Rangers. They're in position with our agents."*

Again Pinkie Pie spoke, but addressing the intruding pony. She didn't bother to edit the recorder; she just let it keep recording.

> *"oooh, those Four Stars ponies are some bad ponies! They need to be banished. Then locked up in the place they were banished to. But first we need to get their secrets from their bad, bad pony heads to make sure there aren't any more of them. So tell my ponies that we want them alive…*
>
> *"OH! I know! Have them go in with one of my Pinkie Balloons!"*

The intruding pony seemed unsure, taken aback by this suggestion.

> *"Miss? You want us to raid Four Stars using a… giant blimp shaped like your head?"*
>
> *"uh huh! I want them to know I'm coming for them!"*

I couldn't keep my mind from envisioning a giant pink balloon with the same staring face as the one on the gigantic billboard. I wasn't sure if that was ingenious or insane.

On the audio recording, I heard the click of the door closing. Pinkie Pie returned to addressing her (former?) friend, Twilight Sparkle.

"Sorry about that. You… wouldn't believe what's been going on. But don't worry. If we get through today, everything will be okay.

"After today, I can do what you wanted me to do. I can try to be your Pinkie Pie again. I'm sorry I haven't before… but I just couldn't. I know you won't believe me but… try to remember the parasprites.

"I've done bad things, Twilight. Awful things. And I've let the ponies in my Ministry do even worse things. And I'm really, really sorry. I don't know if I can be your Pinkie Pie again. But I'll try. That's a Pinkie Pie Promise!

"I…

"Party-Time Mint-als are bad. They mess ponies up. I know I'm messed up. More than ever. But I've needed them. Normal old Pinkie Pie is smart and she can sense when things are coming. But Party-Time Mint-als make me… more. Not better. I know that now. But… more. And we need more. Equestria needs more.

"On Party-Time Mint-als, my Pinkie Sense is way, way more Sense-y. And it's the only thing keeping us a hoof ahead of really, really bad things. My nose has been burning all day. It's like an itchy nose only way, way worse. There are bad ponies, Twilight, and they mean to hurt us. To hurt all of Equestria. And just normal Pinkie Pie can't stop them…

"But after today, it'll all be okay again. I just know it. Just have to get through today…

"…And tomorrow, I've got that appointment. And… and…

"And Twilight? Do you think… maybe… you could go with me? I'm… kinda scared. And it isn't the sort of scared that goes away with giggling.

"I mean, I have you with me now, so you'll kinda be with me anyway. But it's not the same. I want the real Twilight Sparkle. I…

"I want my friend back.

"Please?

"I'll do anything…"

The recording ended. I sat there stunned. There was a whirlwind of thoughts in my head, but none of them quite came into focus.

Party-Time Mint-als mess ponies up.

Pinkie Pie herself said that. But she also said they made her… more. I knew that was true; they were making *me* more right now.

Pinkie Pie had wanted to be rid of them. But she couldn't. Not just because she was addicted, but because she had become reliant on the boost in order to do her job. To try to save the lives of millions of ponies. How could that not be more important than one friendship?

The Equestrian Wasteland requires sacrifices.

The audio recording had an attachment:

```
Error. Connection to Maripony terminal #42 failed.
    Message not sent.
```

Twilight Sparkle had never received Pinkie Pie's last call.

I have you with me now…

My eyes fell on the pony skeleton from which I had retrieved the Twilight Sparkle statuette. A sadness welled up in me. I felt tears falling down my cheeks.

"Celestia and Luna be with you, Pinkie Pie," I said, not knowing what else to say.

* * *

The sun was dipping below the horizon, painting the clouds above with streaks of pink and purple. Twilight colors.

Calamity and SteelHooves were already waiting for us when Velvet Remedy and I reached the floor below and found where the front end of the oversized Red Racer scooter had lodged tightly into what had once been the frame of a huge window, canted slightly. The massive red model groaned in the wind.

"Oh yes. This looks safe," SteelHooves commented.

Velvet Remedy had pulled up when she saw Calamity, staring at him until he looked back, then averting her gaze.

"Okay, I think this time Velvet Remedy and Calamity should go together," I suggested firmly. They had things they needed to talk about, and the sooner they did, the better for them and for me. "I'll go with SteelHooves and help levitate him across the scooter."

The sky above was growing perceptibly darker. We needed to hurry. I stepped up to the ledge and made the mistake of looking down. Massive, paralyzing vertigo hit me. We were fourteen stories above the alley. The tiny red dots of manticores spotted the ground far, far below. Another flew through the alley about halfway between me and them. I felt cold sweat break out across my forehead.

I didn't think I could do this!

"No offense, but I don't want you levitating me, kid. You look like you're about to pass out."

"Change of plan," Calamity announced. "Li'lpip, get back from the ledge. Catch yer breath. Velvet, you go first. Don't worry," he added, seeing her fearful expression. "Ah'll be here t' catch ya if y'all fall. Li'lpip, when yer ready, use yer levitation t' help lighten SteelHooves' load. After that, Ah'll fly ya across."

We all agreed. Once away from the ledge, I felt much better.

Velvet Remedy went first, testing the scooter. It vibrated slightly in the wind, it groaned alarmingly as she made it halfway, but it held. For a moment I wondered why Calamity didn't just fly her across too. But I realized that there was no way he could carry SteelHooves. And it was better to have somepony lighter cross first, with Calamity waiting to swoop in, than to subject the scooter to Mister Heavy Pony right off.

Velvet Remedy jumped off of the back end of the scooter which stuck up about a pony's height from the Red Racer terrace it had fallen against. She smiled weakly and gave a little wave. I waved back. That's when I first noticed them.

I spotted the broken scaffolding that had once held the giant Red Racer scooter several floors above. Nesting within it were the dark, leathery shapes of bloodwings. The sun had sunk fully beneath the horizon, the light was vanishing from the sky, and they were beginning to move.

I levitated out the zebra rifle, thinking that if I could shoot them while they were all nested together, the fire might take out the whole nest. But SteelHooves was stepping onto the scooter; it let out a bone-shaking whine of protest and I turned my focus on wrapping him in a telekinetic cocoon, negating the weight of his packs and armor. He probably weighed less than I did now.

The first bloodwing spread out its wings and took to the air, hunting for prey.

Calamity shot it. The form lurched in mid-flight, then dropped gracelessly from the sky. The report sent all the other bloodwings fluttering into the air!

Calamity swooped, firing again, and another fell. But two more angled towards him, sensing dinner. The pegasus spun about in the air and flew, drawing them away from us.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I split my focus between firing the zebra rifle and keeping most of SteelHooves' weight off the scooter. Focusing on two different tasks wasn't like lifting two objects, but I could do it – just not easily. And I couldn't use the targeting spell without losing my grip on the Steel Ranger.

Most of my shots missed.

I could hear the boom of gunfire from Velvet Remedy's position. She still had my combat shotgun, and with her second shot one of the bloodwings exploded in gore. I saw another flapping high into the air above her. A curving trail of smoke rushed up to met it, SteelHooves' missile exploding on impact. The leathery wings fluttered downward; no sign remained of the body they had once been attached to.

With a thud, my view of the battle was consumed by the face of a bloodwing as it landed on the tip of the Red Racer scooter and snapped at me with dagger like fangs. Unable to see him, I lost my grip on SteelHooves. The scooter gave a painful howl of metal scraping concrete.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I missed. It was right in front of my face, I could smell its rancid breath, and I missed!

The bloodwing curled in its wings, pushing through the window as it bit at me. I felt the huge bat-creature collide with me, the foulness of its stench making me choke. Its blood-seeking fangs scraped against my armor, trying to sink in.

I heard a shot from Calamity, and the bloodwing let out an ear-rending screech. It backed out of the window, looking for its attacker, and flowers of blood blossomed from two holes in its head as Calamity fired again.

"Figured ya might be wantin' a spot o' help there, partner!" Calamity called out, tipping his hat as he flew by. Now four bloodwings were chasing him!

SteelHooves had just made it across. I stared at the scooter. It had shifted from SteelHooves' weight. It looked even less stable than before. But, Calamity was busy; I had to do this myself.

"You can do this," I told myself aloud. "It was *your* plan."

I stepped out onto the scooter, my leg shaking weakly.

⁂

I was halfway across, drenched in sweat, moving an inch at a time, when the bloodwing swooped down at me. I swung the zebra rifle up at my attacker and pulled the trigger.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

The bloodwing screeched, bursting into flame. My eyes widened as the burning bat hurtled right at me. Breaking into a panicked gallop, I raced for the end of the scooter.

The burning corpse of the bloodwing slammed into the scooter behind me, dislodging it from the Ministry of Morale window with a terrifying squeal. I felt the bridge I was racing across lurch away beneath my hooves, leaving me in freefall.

Wrapping myself in my own magic, I tried to push myself forward, adding to my momentum.

By Luna's grace, I was diving towards a window rather than a concrete wall. And, because the Equestrian Wasteland hated me, it was one of the only windows in the entire Red Racer factory with a still-mostly-intact pane of glass.

Glass slashed at me, my body erupting in points of fresh pain, as I crashed through and landed hard, bouncing off a table and crashing through several chairs. Everything went black.

* * *

When I came to, I was in the remains of a conference room. My whole body ached. I was several floors separated from my friends. Enough time had passed for the Party-Time Mint-al to wear off.

And a manticore was sniffing at me.

I moaned. I tried to push myself to my hooves, but it was too hard. I wondered what it would feel like to be eaten. And if the manticore would sting me first.

The manticore leaned down and bit into my mane. Then lifted me up by it and started carrying me like a kitten. It hurt, the back of my neck and scalp burning, but I was hurting too much everywhere else to protest.

The manticore turned and started walking out a hole in the wall. I spotted my zebra rifle amongst the splintered chairs and focused, floating it to me. The manticore either didn't notice or didn't know well enough to care.

I realized I could just shoot it; but it was taking me someplace, and I was curious where. (I needed to go someplace myself, and with any luck it would be the same someplace. Either way, as much as being carried by my mane hurt, I didn't want to walk anywhere either.) Two floors later, I found out as the manticore stepped out of a stairwell onto a balcony that overlooked the factory floor. Little, normal-sized red scooters were scattered everywhere in various states of assembly. Between the decayed conveyor belts and ancient, dilapidated machinery, somepony had set up cages. Many of them were filled with ponies. Most were filled with horrifically bloated, twisted and deformed corpses that used to be ponies. The sight of them twisted my stomach and stabbed through my heart.

Manticores moved freely between the cages like guard dogs.

My captor leaned over the edge of the balcony and opened its mouth, dropping me through the open ceiling of one of the cages. I landed in a thin layer of hay with a heavy, painful thump.

Gingerly, I accessed the inventory-sorting spell in my PipBuck and floated out the extra-strength restoration potion I had pocketed back in Stable Twenty-Nine. I drank greedily, and rested as my body began to mend.

"No way," I whispered as I looked at the cell across from me, on the other side of a conveyor belt full of scooter wheels. Inside was a familiar-looking sea-blue mare. I whimpered. This couldn't be happening.

She spotted me. Which really wasn't surprising given my entrance. "Hey!" She pushed herself to her hooves and waved at me through the bars of her cage, whispering loudly. "It's you!"

I looked up sorrowfully and nodded. "I'm sorry! This is my fault. I should have stayed with you. Seen you safely home."

The blue pony looked about fearfully. "No. He was waiting for me there."

He? He who?

"He took everypony in Gutterville," she hissed fearfully. "Rounded us up with these monsters of his." She looked me over. "You still have your guns! When he comes back, you have to kill him!"

My mind was fogged from post-Mint-al depression and stupidity. I raced to catch up. "Who? What?" And finally, "Why?"

"The doctor. He's torturing us to death!" she told me urgently. "He says he's experimenting on us! He takes a pony back into that other room, and then they scream awful, horrible screams. And when he brings them back, most of them are dead. The lucky ones are. Some are still breathing and feeling, but not for long. Their bodies are all twisted and wrong."

Celestia have mercy.

I stood up, looking down the rows of cages. Dozens of pony faces stared back at me, most with expressions of horror and despair. Some looked to me hopefully. Other ponies looked at me with pity and a heartbreaking acceptance that soon they would die, desecrated and screaming, and there was nothing to be done about it. Two ponies stared at nothing, their minds unable to deal with what was happening in here.

Not while I was still breathing!

The manticore, this doctor's "monster", had put me in a cage. Cages couldn't hold me. And it had left me with my weapons. I focused, lifting first the zebra rifle and then the poison dart gun, floating one to each side of me. I hadn't been prepared for mechanical owls or swarms of sprite-bots or bloodwings. But I had planned for manticores. The bars just made this easier. The only way they could get at me was above.

I slid into S.A.T.S. I'd never used two weapons like this before, but how hard could it be? The poison from a manticore's tail was paralyzing to ponies, fatal with enough of a dose. I didn't know if the manticores had any immunity to their own sting; if not, the poison should slow them at least. Bullets enchanted with fire should do the rest.

I reloaded the clip on the zebra rifle and began to choose targets.

* * *

Picking the lock to my cell would definitely have been easier without the dead manticore in the cage with me. But I managed.

That manticore had been the only one to land inside my cell before I could kill it. The poisoned darts did no more to the manticores than to the sprite-bots and owls, so I had tossed it aside for Little Macintosh. The manticore had managed to rake me rather badly, leaving several bloody gashes across my breast, before Little Macintosh filled it full of noisy death.

The dart gun and the zebra rifle were quiet. Little Macintosh was loud. But then, burning manticores were loud too. The factory was now filled with smoke and the smell of cooked manticore meat.

My cell door swung open and I rushed to the sea-blue mare's cell, working the lock as fast as I could without breaking a bobby pin. "This time, I'll see you home," I promised. But first, "Where's this so-called doctor's lab?"

She pointed the way. But I didn't go until I had opened the lock of every cell that held a living pony. I encouraged those who seemed more mentally fit to help the ponies who didn't have the ability to leave their cells on their own. I stalwartly prevented myself from looking too long or too closely at the dead ones.

"Everypony stay in here. I'll be right back, and then I'm getting you all out of this place and back to…" I looked to the sea-blue pony and she mouthed the name of her village, "Gutterville."

With that, I crouched down and begin to move towards the lab. As soon as I'd left the factory floor, I activated one of the StealthBucks. This doctor wasn't going to see me coming.

* * *

I slid past another manticore, making a mental note of where it was so I could kill it after dealing with the doctor. I didn't want to make any more noise now than I already had.

At the end of the hall, I could see the double doors that lead to what had once been the Red Racer factory's on-site emergency clinic. (What did that say about the original factory's safety levels?) Light poured through the little square windows on the doors and between the cracks.

Cautiously, I nudged the door open, being as quiet as possible, and slipped inside.

The rotting form of a ghoul earth pony in a lab coat was puttering around tables of chemistry sets and medical equipment. Several medical beds lined one wall, stained darkly with what was probably not just blood. On the farthest one, a brown earth pony lay strapped, eyes wide and dead, a huge bubble having malignantly grown out of his chest. In the center of the room were the corpses of flayed-open manticores. They looked like they had been dissected. Along one wall hung dozens of manticore tails. In the far corner, barrels were stacked two-ponies high. Each bore a yellow, diamond-shaped label with dark purple warning symbols.

Toxic Magical Byproduct.
Property of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.
DO NOT TOUCH, BREATHE or STARE AT.

"No, no," the ghoul doctor muttered to himself. "I'm so close. That last batch almost worked. What am I missing?"

He trotted over to a terminal, looking over screens of data. Then turned towards the pile of dead manticores. "Look at you. You look exactly the same as you did before the bombs…"

Except, I was guessing, not so dead and autopsied.

"…Radiation doesn't touch you. *Taint* doesn't harm you. You're the perfect creatures."

I floated Little Macintosh out. Ghoul doc wasn't a sadistic raider type; he was totally cracked. I hesitated to shoot, letting him finish his disturbed rant. I wanted to know what these ponies had died so horribly for. Even if I knew it wouldn't make any sense.

The doctor stopped, staring at the end of one of the tables. Amongst the clipboards and hot plates sat a memory orb. He reached out and touched it, rolling it under his hoof. Then turned away. "I know the secret is in your poison," he announced to the flayed manticore bodies. "I just haven't perfected the formula yet. A few more tweaks, a few more tests… But I will crack this!"

He spun to the dead buck on the medical bed. Trotting up to him, the doctor whispered encouragingly, "Won't be long now. Every pony is going to remember you. All of you. And, most of all, me. We're going to give the ponies of Equestria the cure for Taint! I think I'll call it Taint-Away…" He paused, as if the pony corpse had responded. "No, you're right, that's a silly name."

Stepping back, he waved a hoof at the corpse, smiling. "No, no, not at all. No need to thank me. I was happy to let you do your part!"

Good. Goddess. Celestia.

The doctor paused in a moment of revelation. "I'm going to need more ponies."

* * *

Curiosity got the better of me. I was invisible, and this psychopath wasn't going to hurt anypony else right away. I figured I had time.

I moved to the far table, lowered my horn, and focused on the memory orb. The real world fell away from me…

* * *

…replaced by a luxurious office. Trophies lined the shelves. A much smaller oversized model of a Red Racer scooter hung from the ceiling. Everything had an odd reddish tint to it, and my view kept bobbing and tilting, making me seasick.

Behind a large desk crafted from dark wood stood an older mare with an orange coat and purple hair that showed the first solid streaks of grey. "Anything yet?" The voice was damningly familiar.

"Just one so far," came a voice not from me but from near me. I suddenly realized that this memory was distinctly and terrifyingly different. I could see and hear, but I couldn't feel or smell or taste. I had no sense of a body at all.

My perspective suddenly tilted crazily, leaving me looking at the ceiling. Then it righted itself again. Much more of this and I would vomit, possibly giving away my position. But I was locked in the memory until it was over. I realized I had made a grievous tactical error.

I was bobbing towards a bookshelf. Then I was staring at the wall above it through the haze of red. Slowly my view pivoted until I was looking into the face of a stern white unicorn with scarlet hair and a matching scarlet glow around her horn. She stared right into me. Then her horn stopped glowing and the red haze vanished, leaving the room in sharp and perfect color. The unicorn trotted across the room, her horn beginning to glow again as she scanned over the furniture on the far side. When her horn passed near one of the lamps, there was a gleam of brilliant pink from it. The pink gleam flashed with the sound of a popping balloon and was gone.

“This is the last one, Miss Scootaloo. Your room is clean of any Ministry of Morale snooping,” the unicorn said. “Shall I send them in now?”

Scootaloo nodded, grimacing. “Please. My friends have been waiting long enough.” She watched the unicorn walk out of the office then looked around with a sigh. Her gaze caught me.

“Oh, Peek-a-Boo!” she called out after the unicorn. “You left your…” Her voice trailed off with a sigh, “…Sparkle~Cola.”

I was a Sparkle~Cola? No, wait… I was a spy device planted inside a bottle of Sparkle~Cola. Scootaloo trotted over to me, leaning up and grasping what I now assumed was the top of a cola bottle, lifted it, and carried me over to her waste basket. My vision twisted weirdly as I fell, landing face up amongst her trash. She stared at me through the circle of the waste basket, then trotted out of sight.

I heard the door open. All I could see was the ceiling.

“Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle, it’s so good to see you two. I mean, you have no idea!” Scootaloo said, sounding relieved. Then a tenseness crept into her voice. “You weren’t followed, were you? Nopony saw you?”

“Good to see ya too,” Apple Bloom said with a bit of cheer. “And no, we were careful. But do ya really think it’s a good idea to have a *secret meeting* a block away from the Ministry of Morale?”

“You know, I chose this place thinking they would never expect anypony to plan something right under their noses. But Peek-a-Boo found two more Ministry bugs in my office just before you got here.”

“Who’s Peek-a-Boo?” asked the sweet voice of Sweetie Belle.

“Head Pony of my personal security,” Scootaloo answered. Then stomped, “I *hate* this!”

“Scoots?”

Scootaloo growled with frustration. “I hate all this hiding and sneaking around. It’s not fun anymore!”

“It was never *fun,*” commented Apple Bloom.

“No. You’re right. It’s *sick.*” Scootaloo stomped partially into view, waving her hoof towards her office window. “We’re having clandestine meetings, creating new types of dual encryption, lurking about in unfinished Stables just to be able to talk freely to each other. These are the ponies I respect the most, two of them are *your sisters,* and we have to *hide* from them to get anything done!”

“Hey now, nothin’ wrong with Applejack!”

“Rarity’s… just under pressure.”

Scootaloo sounded like she spit her bit. “Okay, granted, Applejack hasn’t really done anything bad. And I’m proud to say that Rainbow Dash is still good too. But the others? Pinkie Pie? And really, Sweetie Bell… the *Ministry of Image?* What. The. *FUCK!”*

“Stop talking about my sister like that,” Sweetie Belle asked with an edge of warning in her voice.

“Yeah. We all know the score. No need t’ rub it.” Apple Bloom suggested, “Let’s talk ’bout somethin’ else.”

"Like the Manehattan Stables," Sweetie Belle prompted. "I hear you've started sending ponies into them already…"

"Yeah, or why you keep changin' the designs t' my Stables."

Scootaloo sighed. "We've been over this, Apple Bloom. We have to sometimes change the Stable layout and features to accommodate the Experiments."

"But my designs were perfect!" complained Apple Bloom.

"Exactly," retorted the purple-haired orange pony. "Your designs are always perfect. That's why everypony uses them. Your designs have single-hoofedly put terminals in every household…"

"pfft. The terminals were an early design. PipBucks are *much* better."

"…But," Scootaloo persisted, "Every Stable can't be perfect. Not for the Experiments to work."

"But why not?"

Scootaloo groaned, walking out of sight. Apple Bloom followed her, moving into view. I only saw part of her head, but she was a pretty, pale yellow pony with a brilliant rose mane. I guessed she was the same age as the orange mare.

"I mean, I know that if we ever have to use the Stables, it's important t' make sure ponies don't jus' make the same mistakes after they get out. But it's just as important t' make sure they *get out,* right? So why change a design meant t' optimize the chances of that? I just… I don't get why…" Apple Bloom glanced down at me. "…hey, when didja started drinkin' Sparkle~Cola again?"

I couldn't tell if Scootaloo was annoyed or thankful for the change of topic. "I haven't. You know I can't touch the stuff after hearing about that accident at the plant. That was Peek-a-Boo's."

"oh," Apple Bloom said, looking away. "An' what is this 'bout you callin' ponies into the Manehattan Stables already. The Omega Protocols ain't been activated yet."

"I… well, you know how things are headed. Do you really think that we'll get much warning when they do? Enough for an evacuation?"

Sweetie Belle answered. "No."

"And… okay, I'll be honest. I've begun to have second thoughts about some of the Experiments, especially in the Manehattan Stables. They're… risky," Scootaloo admitted heavily. "I'd like to do a dry run, just to make sure there aren't any problems before the real thing."

Apple Bloom cocked her head. "But… won't that tell everypony what we're up to? That will ruin the Experiments." She didn't sound like she wanted that any more than Scootaloo did.

"I know," Scootaloo stomped morosely. "So we'll keep the Manehattan ponies in their Stables until the threat of this war is over. After that, it won't matter anymore."

"I… don't think I can spin that," said Sweetie Belle cautiously. "They'll see us as evil ponies experimenting on helpless captives. How can we justify that if it turns out it wasn't needed after all?"

"Don't worry," Scootaloo said solemnly. "I've arranged things so you two are in the clear. It will all look like my idea." With a humorless chuckle, she noted, "Really, it kinda was anyway."

"Scoots…"

"Yeah, we can't let you do that."

A hoof hit the desk with enough force to shake the trash basket. (I was now staring at a wrapper from Cupcake Emporium.)

"Yes you can. Because you have to," Scootaloo's tone was fierce and, I suspected, on the verge of crying. "We can't let this happen again. Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie… all of them. I love them too. But this thing they've created is out of control. And it's hurting everypony. And I can't let it happen again. ***Ever!***

"This isn't our Equestria anymore! It's not the happy, safe, pleasant world any of us grew up in. I don't understand how it could have gotten this way. H-how… how it c-c-could have gotten this bad! Somepony needs to figure it out! And fix it! And… and… and…

"And if I have to become the villain of the piece to do that, then I will."

* * *

Reality reasserted itself without forewarning. And I immediately knew I was in trouble. The memory had been far longer than the others. The invisibility spell had worn off. At some point, I had simply appeared in the room, transfixed by the memory orb.

Now I was on the medical table, bound in chains. My weapons had been removed and stashed, probably nearby but still out of sight. I was still wearing my armored utility barding. It was soaked in blood from the slashes across my chest and I was woozy from loss of blood.

The ghoul doctor trotted up to me. "Oh hello there? Back with me now? Good. Don't worry, you're going to help a lot of ponies…"

The doctor leaned out of sight then returned with a syringe in his mouth. He stared down at me.

And continued to stare.

And kept staring, frozen in place, until the sea-blue mare walked up, my poison dart gun in her mouth, and tipped the paralyzed doctor over with a nudge of her hoof.

I gave her a thankful look.

She turned, looked down, and started stomping furiously on the ghoul doctor. I heard the skull crack and splinter. The pony seemed to be taking out all her hurt and rage on the ghoul, stomping and stomping and stomping long after he must have been dead.

It took me time to float out my screwdriver and a bobby pin and unlock each of my chains. They were easy locks, but I was wounded and alarmingly lightheaded. I broke three bobby pins before I was through. All that time, the sea-blue pony slammed her hooves down on what was now more paste than a body.

She didn't stop until I wrapped her in a hug and held her.

* * *

I sat on a ledge, overlooking the depressing town of Gutterville as the early morning sun broke over the city. Below, Velvet Remedy was caring for the ponies we had helped back here. Calamity and SteelHooves had been discussing possible defenses that could be added around the collection of hovels. Calamity was explaining now about the turret array we'd put together back at Junction R-7.

I had met up with my friends in the Red Racer factory about half an hour after the death of the ghoul doctor. They had managed to find the safe that DJ Pon3 was interested in, but had no way of unlocking it. Instead, SteelHooves had blown apart the entire wall around the safe and had been dragging it around behind himself with a harness. Calamity had looted everything else.

Inside were two demo recordings. "Hush Now, Quiet Now (Manehattan Never Sleeps Rendition)" by Sweetie Belle, and a song called "Sing It" by the Cutie Mark Crusaders. I hoped that Homage liked her prize.

Watcher floated silently next to me. After the Ministry of Morale hub, I wasn't sure I would ever see those little sprite-bots the same way again.

"It's not enough, is it?" I asked, breaking the silence. "Knowing your virtue, I mean." I remembered Watcher's list of Great Virtues of Ponykind. But those virtues, I'd come to realize, weren't great on their own; I had seen dark, stunted versions of many of them. Pinkie/Silver Bell's mirthless, sorrow-born laughter. Gawd's loyalty only to contract and coin. Monterey's honesty out of desperate self-image. I'd almost collected a set.

"No," Watcher replied in that toneless, mechanical voice which Watcher hid behind. "There's a… spark that's needed. Without it, a virtue isn't anything special."

"What's the spark?" I asked forlornly. I didn't even know my virtue. Now I needed a spark too?

"Friendship," Watcher said simply.

I looked up at the floating spritebot, the shifting of position making the bandages on my breast rub. "Friendship?" I turned to watch Velvet Remedy bandage the leg of a pink stallion. I saw Calamity laughing good-naturedly at something SteelHooves had said. Friendship.

I *had* friendship. I felt a pang of joy as the acceptance of that cut through the petty jealousy and creeping paranoia that had threatened to overwhelm me. *I had friends.*

"You could say I've made a study of the subject," Watcher admitted. Then, before I could ask, a static pop heralded Watcher's disappearance. The sprite-bot floated away on tambourine music.

* * *

Homage smiled, floating the two demos away from me. "Thank you. All of you. DJ Pon3 has been waiting to hear these for a long time. He can't tell you how much he appreciates this."

"Well, he could start by telling us himself," SteelHooves suggested dourly.

"Sorry," Homage apologized. "He's very busy preparing the next news segment. But he sent me to make sure you knew how thrilled he is. And to give you this."

Homage's horn glowed as she guided the flux regulator to rest at Calamity's hooves.

"Aww," intoned Velvet Remedy with clear disappointment. "I was hoping to meet him. And sing for him."

I flinched, realizing I hadn't mentioned that to Homage yet. The pretty grey unicorn shot me a questioning look. "um… tomorrow," I stammered. "I'm sure DJ Pon3 will have time for us tomorrow. And it has been such a loooong day, do any of us really want to meet him without getting some rest first?" I swallowed, looking hopefully to the others. "And a bath?"

That sealed it for Velvet Remedy, who nodded primly. "Oh, right! Whatever was I thinking?"

"And don't you want to give that… thing," I pointed to the arcane device as I spoke to Calamity, "a good look-over before we go anywhere?"

"Ayep."

I looked to SteelHooves. I had nothing. But he seemed to get the hint and turned to leave. "Coming with us, Littlepip?"

"Um… I'll catch up," I offered, needing to hang back at least long enough to pitch the idea of Velvet Remedy's music to Homage.

My friends walked into the elevator and turned around. Velvet was smiling to me, letting me know once again how thankful she was for our talk earlier, and for my forgiveness. Calamity gave me a tip of his hat.

The doors slid closed. The elevator began to descend, taking them down towards our suite.

"Thank you, Stable Dweller," Homage said softly. "And not just for the demos. I've already heard from Gutterville."

Remembering Watcher's trick when we first met, I felt a pang. "Did you… know?"

But Homage's eyes went innocently wide. "No. If I did, I would have told you. Because if I had known, and had told you, I know you would have gone in just to help them."

I nodded and smiled gratefully. I wish everypony treated me like Homage.

"So, Velvet Remedy… she any good."

I grinned. "The best. Direct descendant from Sweetie Belle." That caught Homage's attention. "And she's not only inherited the skill, I think she's surpassed it."

"Well, then this I've *got* to hear."

I poked my hoof at the floor, thoughts of Velvet Remedy filling me with melancholy. There was something I hadn't had the courage to ask before. And now my heart was aching to know. "Homage… can I ask *you* a favor?"

"Sure," the grey unicorn smiled brightly. "What, have a request?"

I took a deep breath. This was going to be humiliating. But Homage had eyes almost everywhere. If anyone could find anything for me, it was her. "You watch all over Equestria… the parts you can see. Have you ever spotted a mare out there who… well… who might like me?" I closed my eyes, almost drowning in embarrassment. "I mean, a mare who *likes mares* who might like a mare like me?"

Every second Homage was quiet felt like an anvil falling on my head. Followed by a hay cart. Followed by a piano.

"I might…" Homage said cautiously.

I sagged, feeling both relieved but mortified. "Then… could you point me in the right direction? Tell me where?"

I felt a hoof gently touch my shoulder.

"Littlepip, I said *I* might."

I turned to look at her, not comprehending. Then, looking into her eyes, I felt a spark of understanding. "oh…" I blinked. Her expression softened… sensuously…

The spark ignited into a fire. "OH!"

Homage smiled beautifully.

Thank you, Celestia!

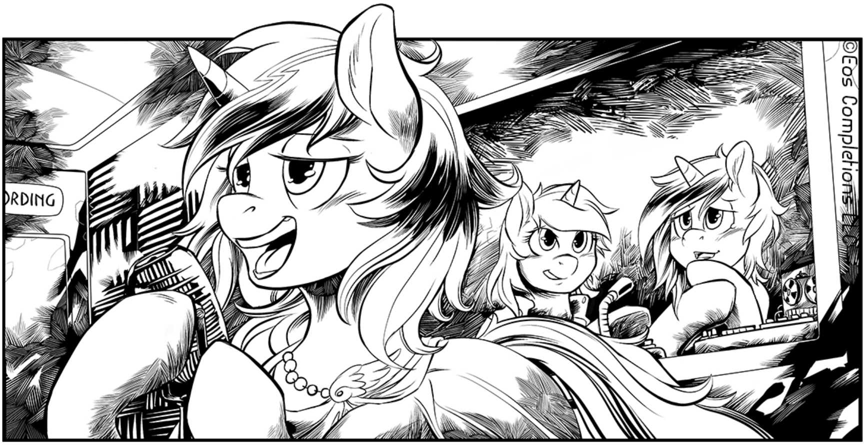
Footnote: Level Up.

Skills Note: Science has reached 100%

New Perk: Action Filly (level two) – You know your targeting spell like the back of your hoof, making you about 20% cooler in combat. For each level of this perk, you gain +15 action points in S.A.T.S.

Chapter Eighteen

Unnatural Causes



"That job had strange written all over it."

Hope.

Finally, I had found another mare whom I respected and admired, and who respected (and maybe even admired) me in return. One who was attracted to mares, and who I could believe was at least a little physically attracted to me. We weren't in love; we barely knew each other… but there was the possibility of love. There was, in a word, hope.

The last sixteen hours had made for a very long day. As much as I would have loved to spend the next several hours with Homage, she had realized straight away that I was in no shape for anything but sleep. So she had sent me off back to my suite, where Velvet Remedy had puttered and tsked about my wounds until I had fallen into a dreamless sleep out of sheer exhaustion.

I woke up very late in the morning, hungry… and for more than just food. Velvet Remedy had already awoken and disappeared to the shops to get the best caps for everything Calamity had decided to swipe from the ruins of the Red Racer factory and the Ministry of Morale hub. Most of what Velvet and I had scavenged was intended for our own use – food and ammo, mostly, as well as the poison glands I cut out of the manticores.

After what she had been through, I had decided to allow the sea-blue pony to keep my poisoned dart gun. I had everything needed to create another once we returned home. Calamity had seen to the purchase of a workstation (currently very disassembled) which he would install at Junction R-7 when we arrived. Which, thanks to the part needed to repair the *Sky Bandit,* shouldn't be more than a few days.

I wasn't about to leave until I had the chance to spend… quality time with Homage.

Out of more than curiosity, I tuned my PipBuck to DJ Pon3's station and listened to the music playing while I cleaned and groomed myself. Homage had already begun to integrate the new music into DJ Pon3's playlists. That unusually upbeat song about mending friendships which Homage and I had danced to was playing while I cleaned my teeth and tried to work all the tangles out of my mane and tail.

"Hoo-RAH!"

DJ Pon3's voice thundered over the airwaves as the song ended.

"Celestia and Luna bless us, we have NEW MUSIC!

"And with that new music comes some new News! Ready for this? Last night, our Wasteland Savior…"

My telekinesis imploded, dropping everything I was floating.

"…that kid from Stable Two, found and rescued the good folks of Gutterville! And what horror did she save them from, you ask? A psychotic ghoul scientist who was performing experiments with Taint and who had bred himself a small army of manticores! That, folks, is what they mean by crushing two radroaches with one hoof: she not only saved the lives of over two dozen ponies, but she solved Manehattan's manticore problem too!"

I dropped my head into the sink, letting out a whimpering sigh. My reputation was totally out of control. I barely heard the door to the suite open as I anguished over what ponies would be thinking and expecting of me now. Part of me swore Homage just liked making me squirm.

"Hell, you see the kid, tell her to stop by and visit. Ol' DJ Pon3 wants t' give her a big kiss for that one!"

My head shot up, catching my horn painfully on the faucet. "Ow!"

"You do know there are more civilized ways to get a drink of water than slurping it out of the sink, right?" Velvet Remedy's voice rang out from the other room.

Wincing, I touched my horn, looking at myself in the mirror, then turned to Velvet. She was pulling a small red wagon behind her, loaded with supplies and dresses. I stared at the rather fancy and elegant gowns.

"I thought we would want to look our best for DJ Pon3," she stated simply. Crap. I'd forgotten about Velvet Remedy's impending audition. "Don't worry. I know your size. I've wrapped you in bandages often enough that I ought to."

I felt myself blushing.

Velvet Remedy floated a pair of dresses, both simple yet graceful, towards me. "They'll look perfect on you. Trust me. The one on the right will really bring out your eyes. The one on the left will beautifully complement your mane and tail."

"Which one should I wear, then?"

"Up to you. Or, if you want to be mysterious, both. Find an excuse to step out, and change halfway through the evening." Velvet Remedy smiled brightly. "Go on, take them. A girl can never have too many dresses."

I nodded, floating them to my bed with care. Then jumped and gave Velvet Remedy a hug. "Thank you!"

"Oh, think nothing of it, dear," she whinnied kindly.

* * *

Velvet Remedy was expecting to meet DJ Pon3.

I needed to talk with Homage and find out how she wanted to handle this. If Homage was willing to reveal herself to me, trusting me with such a big secret, then it stood to reason she would be equally willing in regard to my friends. Part of me, however, didn't want her to. I wanted it to remain our little secret – just Homage and I. Something special between us. I wanted her not to want to trust any other pony, not even Velvet Remedy, with such a gift. It was a selfish thought; I knew I should be ashamed of myself for having it. But I consoled myself that this was Homage's secret to tell or keep, so the fact that I was keeping it from my friends was an act of virtue.

On the way to the elevator, I passed a poster. Pinkie Pie, it insisted, was still watching me. *FOREVER.*

On the opposite wall was a poster of Fluttershy. This time, not modeling for Sparkle~Cola, but an actual poster for her own Ministry:

War? Fear? Death?
We Must Do Better!
MINISTRY OF PEACE

We must do better. We should be better. I should be better.

I understood why Velvet Remedy loved that yellow pegasus pony. If only there had been more like her, then the Equestrian Wasteland may never have been.

I was still contemplating the poster when Homage stepped out of the elevator. Her face brightened as she spotted me. "Ah. Just the toaster repairpony I was looking for."

I would never live that down.

"Homage," I breathed, feeling my heart flutter a bit as I fully drank in the fact that this pretty grey unicorn with the vibrant blue mane actually had feelings for me. Possibly romantic feelings. Or, at least, she was willing to entertain the idea of them. That alone was more than I'd ever had from a mare before. And from a mare whom I really liked. And who was cute too!

"Yes?" she said playfully, making me stammer.

"I…um… I, that is we… When and how did you want to do the thing at the place?"

"The thing at the place?"

I waves a hoof in flustered exasperation. "You know. Velvet Remedy? DJ Pon3? Recording her music?"

"Oh!" Homage grinned. "*That* thing at *that* place. You trust her, right? The ponies of Tenpony Tower know of me as DJ Pon3's errand girl, but I really can't let it get out that I'm a bit closer to him than that. She can keep a secret?"

Part of me hated sharing the truth about Homage, but it would be wrong not to. "Forever."

* * *

"*You* are DJ Pon3?"

Homage smiled, clearly enjoying Velvet Remedy's disbelief.

Velvet Remedy had made herself up gorgeously and donned one of her new dresses, a stunning purple number, all with the intention of making a breathtaking first impression. Now she was shooting me cross glances.

“I’ve got a whole recording studio in here, so the recording will be as good as you are,” Homage said, stepping between us as she spoke to Velvet. I found myself staring at Homage’s flanks, covered with a silky silver dress that sparkled as it clung so tightly to…

Velvet was looking at me. She’d caught me staring, and the little smile on her face made my heart sink. I’d be lucky if the rest of our travels weren’t to a soundtrack of “Littlepip and Homage sitting in an appletree.”

Homage gave Velvet Remedy a much abbreviated tour, skipping the roof and the Athenaeum altogether but showing off the small recording studio that exited off the M.A.S.E.B.S. Velvet looked like she was in heaven. No matter how much she protested, no matter how much she longed to be a medical pony, the only one Velvet could hope to convince that she didn’t get unparalleled joy from singing was Velvet herself.

As Velvet Remedy entered the studio chamber, Homage turned her attention to the recording equipment, waving her horn over a desk of switches and dials. Rows of colorful lights lit up in response. I was left to sit in a corner and watch the show.

Velvet Remedy approached the microphone. “Sound check? Do you hear me clearly, DJ… what should I call you?”

“Homage, when we’re together,” the grey unicorn replied.

I felt a completely irrational twinge of jealousy at the mention of them and “together.” I clopped my forehead. Such feelings were as unbecoming as they were ridiculous. “Stop being a silly pony, Littlepip!” I whispered to myself under my breath.

“This is an amazing setup, Homage,” Velvet admired. Then almost too casually, she asked, “Would you happen to have a workbench anywhere around here?”

Homage looked up from the recording desk. “Yes? Why?”

“Oh good. Littlepip has a project, and she needs a private workspace,” Velvet Remedy claimed. Now I felt really stupid for having felt that involuntary twinge; even on the verge of giving a performance that would be heard Equestria-wide, Velvet Remedy was thinking about helping me.

“I suspect the project will take her *all night,*” Velvet purred conspiratorially. “It’s all right if she spends the night with you, isn’t it?”

Solar-flaring orgasms of Celestia!

“Oh, I’d love the chance to…” purred Homage back, “… entertain her for a night.”

I was doomed.

“Ready when you are.”

Velvet Remedy’s horn began to glow. The recording chamber filled with colorful light and rich, electric music. Homage was struck with awe. I smiled, knowing the impact of a Velvet Remedy performance.

“Music is my remedy…”

* * *

Four hours later, Homage and I strolled the mall of Tenpony Tower. Velvet Remedy had been amazing. At her insistence, Homage had let Velvet perform each song multiple times, making sure she had the best possible recording for each. Once her performance was completed, my charcoal-coated companion had been exhausted, and had taken her leave of us to take a nap.

Homage had been gushing about the performance and the new music since. Thankfully, I felt no repeat pangs of jealousy at this. I was, in fact, rather in awe myself. Homage and I spent over an hour just reliving the performance like a couple of fanfillies after a concert.

The first song had long been a Stable Two favorite (if I was to attribute to her a theme song, it would have been that one) and the second also a popular one from her days in the Stable. The third was her rendition of a song that she had once told me was originally performed by Pinkie Pie and the original DJ Pon3 at Hoofbeats, something she had chosen especially for DJ Pon3 – it was the song she had started to sing at Shattered Hoof, and I was thrilled to finally hear it to completion! The effect on Homage was thrilling. I loved seeing the little grey unicorn squee!

The final number was one I had heard Velvet Remedy constructing during our travels. The one she had once claimed was about me. I couldn't decide if I wanted to melt or to hide.

We had reached the edge of a mezzanine staring down into the lower floor of the Tenpony Tower mall, filled with classy shops (including one just for wine and another across from it that had been just for cheese, but was now closed). As we approached the stairs down, I stopped at the sight below. SteelHooves was trotting about, peering into storefront windows and taking in displays of art, casual as you please. All around him, ponies were stopping and staring, some shying away. I saw a mother pull her curious filly behind her protectively.

"Your friend is causing quite a stir," Homage noted.

I chuckled. "I guess the high society of Tenpony isn't used to seeing a pony in magical power armor." I wondered if his armored hooves were scuffing their pretentiously polished marble floor.

"Well, he is a Steel Ranger. That gives most ponies pause."

This was not the first time I had heard somepony I trusted suggest the Steel Rangers had a less than sterling reputation. "Why is that?"

Homage looked at me with surprise. "You're traveling with a Steel Ranger," she said slowly, "And you don't know anything about them?"

I opened my muzzle to say that I knew they were… what? I knew them from the posters, but those were two hundred years old. Truth was, I didn't know the Steel Rangers. I knew SteelHooves. At least more than my companions knew the enigmatic pony completely concealed by his armor. I'd seen a memory orb. One of a memory I had assumed (with reason) was his.

"No… I suppose I really don't. Tell me."

Homage guided us away from the stairs and towards a table at a small but expensive eatery. A waitress pony brought us menus the moment we sat down, managing to look haughty, as if her customers were beneath her. Looking at the menu, I once again discovered that everything on it was a fancified version of pre-war food.

I shook my head, pushing the menu aside. "Fifty bottle caps for a banana puree that I can find in the refrigerator of a ruined building for free? No thanks. Frying it into strips and weaving it to look like a basket isn't worth that much."

Homage lifted an eyebrow. "Try to remember that most ponies here wouldn't last a day on the outside. There are raiders, slavers, renegade security robots and possibly even a stray manticore between them and that 'free' food." She looked around at the other patrons, then leaned forward and whispered, "Honestly, I don't think most of these ponies could handle radroaches. They'd stomp one, then the other radroaches would kill them while they were still trying to scrape radroach gunk from their hooves in uncontrolled disgust."

I looked around at the elite mares and gentlestallions of Tenpony. She was probably right.

"The stockpiles from Tenpony Tower itself ran out generations ago. What they sell now has been acquired from scavenger ponies, specialists in plumbing the ruins of Manehattan for foodstuffs. Fortunately, there were food shops, restaurants and groceries galore in this city before the bomb, so scavenging has been as fruitful as it is dangerous. But scavenger ponies don't risk their necks for cheap. And with how irradiated all the water is, it's hard for a pony family to purify enough for a tiny garden. For a restaurant like this, fresh crops are out of the question."

I considered that. Then picked up the menu again.

I ordered the fried banana puree basket and a bottle of wine. It was surprisingly full of flavor.

"The Steel Rangers," Homage explained over our glasses of wine, "Are the old guard of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. They see themselves as the knights of the greatness of the past, which they consider to be tied to Equestria's advancements in technology and industry, and custodians of the technology that their Ministry helped create.

"Honestly, most of them would be more interested in saving your PipBuck than saving you."

* * *

After lunch, I treated Homage to an early evening at the spa. The last time had been so utterly delightful that I had to share the experience with her.

Homage had asked that the small radio in the spa be turned to DJ Pon3's station. From the expression the spa ponies gave her, they didn't much approve of the ghoul-loving renegade, but were used to this request. With the new music playing, I suspected that the broadcast's popularity was peaking.

One of the pretty spa ponies was dabbing my face with cleansing and revitalizing mud when the voice of DJ Pon3 blasted out of the little radio.

"Good evening, children!"

I looked to Homage in surprise. She winked back before they covered her eyes with slices of cucumber.

"Got a question for all you faithful listeners. Have any of you mares or bucks ever seen… a ghost? 'Now, DJ Pon3!' I hear ya say. 'There's no such thing as ghosts! Been ghost stories about Manehattan ever since my grandmother's grandmother was a filly, and no pony's ever actually seen one. Ghost stories are all made up, y'know!' Well, now what if I, DJ Pon3, your voice in the wasteland, were to tell you that I *have* seen a ghost? And I don't mean heroic Stable Dwellers who miraculously survive falling off cliffs in trains, not this time."

I groaned aloud. I would have clenched my eyes, but they were already being covered with vegetables.

“Now, it was several years ago, and I had just gotten myself out of a tight spot with one of those manticores, so I was ridin’ Dash and Stampede at the time. But she was there, Celestia’s honest truth. Never seen her again, or found the exact spot I’d stumbled onto. But there are more crazy things in this wild wasteland than you’d believe.”

Later, as spa ponies gave us a ponypedi and horn treatment, I asked Homage, “What is Stampede?”

“Oh, a mixture of Rage and painkillers,” Homage answered. “A friend and I found the recipe in the ruins of a M.O.P. clinic when we were younger.

My curiosity took hold. “A friend? Will I get to meet her?”

“No. I’m afraid my friend didn’t survive the efforts to get us into Tenpony Tower.”

* * *

I felt amazingly refreshed and relaxed. Our time in the spa had been pleasant and intimate, and I had high hopes for the rest of the evening.

As we stepped out of the spa, Homage leaned close and whispered, “Had that last bit pre-recorded. It’s a good idea to be seen in public occasionally while DJ Pon3 is ‘live’ on the radio.”

I nodded, staring at her just a little. The mud bath had been the first time I had seen her wearing neither a dress nor a spa robe. Her cutie mark looked like it could be either a speaker or a megaphone. Either way, it was perfectly appropriate to her. And I could see why she chose to keep it private through dressing finely. If anyone suspected she was more than just DJ Pon3’s errand filly, the cutie mark was all but a dead giveaway.

Three little ponies galloped up to us, two colts and a younger filly. The two youngest had tears in their eyes, the colt trying to hold his back while the filly was blinking hers away with a hopeful expression.

I heard Homage moan at their approach.

“Miss Homage,” the oldest called out as they drew close. “DJ Pon3 says that daddy tried to rob the Heroine of the Wasteland, an’ that’s why he’s in jail. Is it true?”

“Did he really do that?”

“Daddy wouldn’t.”

Oh fuck me with the moon. Moon, sun, both of them. Rape me hard.

Homage looked, if anything, even less comfortable. But she stood by the truth. “Yes, children. I’m afraid he did.”

“But he’s really sorry…” I interjected, even though I knew the only thing Monterey Jack was actually sorry about was that it put him in a bad place. “…and I’m sure they’ll let him go. I…”

I paused, wincing as I chose my words speaking more slowly, “I know the Stable Dweller is really upset to see him in jail.”

“Will she save him?” the filly blurted out with so much hope in her voice it nearly knocked me over.

“Why would she do that?” her eldest brother retorted. “He threatened her and tried to *rob* her.”

I looked to Homage hopelessly.

"They ain't gonna let him go," said the middle brother. "They're gonna hang him in two days."

* * *

I paced back and forth in the Athenaeum as Homage watched me sadly. "You can't interfere."

"Oh yes I can!"

Homage gave a melancholy sigh. "I understand why you feel you should. Even if he did lay his own hay. But from what you said, it doesn't really sound like he wants to be helped."

I snorted. "Then I'm not going to leave it up to him. He has three children that need looking after. They need to come before his twisted-up code of honor."

"Littlepip," Homage whimpered. "We've just met. I don't want to lose you already."

I stopped, shocked. "Lose me?"

In exasperation, Homage pointed out, "If you do anything, and survive the guards with their battle saddles, you and your friends will never be allowed to set hoof in Tenpony Tower again."

I turned and looked into her eyes. They were glistening, ready to cry.

"I'll be with you, always, pretty much wherever you go. Just tune in to DJ Pon3 and I'll be there. But… *you* won't be able to be with *me.*"

I fell back on my haunches as the weight of what I would be sacrificing descended fully upon me.

* * *

Night was falling as I walked slowly along the Celestia Line. Velvet Remedy and Steelhooves walked in line behind me, Calamity was flying scout.

All I had told the others was that I was going for a walk. Every one of them insisted on coming with me. Only Velvet Remedy asked if there was a reason why, and she did so in private. She could tell I was distressed, and she was alarmed that I was not spending the evening with Homage. Calamity, I think, was looking for an excuse to stretch his wings. SteelHooves simply fell in behind me without comment; I felt he would go anywhere I did, and I still had no idea why.

Truth was, as much as I wanted to spend the night with Homage, I was too messed up inside to enjoy it. I needed fresh air. I needed to clear my head. I needed a distraction.

Fortunately, the grey unicorn had not only understood but had encouraged me.

Velvet Remedy's horn provided light; I didn't even need the one from my PipBuck. The quiet of the night wrapped us like a blanket, punctured by the occasional distant screams or gunshots. Each time, Calamity swooped away to investigate. Sometimes, he came back with reports of scavengers fighting off wild animals; most of the time, he returned no wiser than before. Once, his disappearance was followed by several little thundercracks – I knew the sound of his battle saddle by heart. I heard no return fire, but we all stopped and waited and worried all the same. It took him a quarter of an hour to return, and when he did so, he was laden with sacks of pilfered goods.

“Raider nest. Bunch o’ earth pony raiders with spears an sledgehammers,” he explained with a grin. “Nopony expects a pegasus!”

He landed and passed me a sack full of metal apples. “They didn’t have any ammo either, but they had these.” SteelHooves offered to take the grenades. Of the lot of us, he was the only one who actually had any skill with the things.

“One o’ these days, we gotta getcha somethin’ that don’t do splash damage.”

Calamity passed another sack, this one clearly holding a square box with beveled edges inside, to Velvet Remedy. “The medical kit they ’ad was locked, so Ah jus’ brung the whole thing.”

“Brought,” Velvet corrected as she took the sack.

“Tha’s what Ah said.”

Velvet rolled her eyes to me before slinging the sack over her, clasping it to her saddlebag harness. There was no rush in opening it. I could pick the lock when we reached the next Four Stars station.

Presents delivered, Calamity flew ahead again.

* * *

The next Four Stars station was the sight of a massacre. I watched SteelHooves tread between the bodies of over thirty ghouls. Most of them looked like they had been mowed down by heavy minigun fire. Powerful explosions had torn holes in the walls of the station and the homes that had been built into and around it.

The place was rank with the wet smell of ghoul corpses. The buzzing of flies was a constant drone that reminded me of the high whine of Stable Two’s lights.

Velvet Remedy had fled up the line about three hundred yards, unable to stomach this. Calamity was looting the bodies.

“Rottingtail’s group,” SteelHooves finally announced, long after I had come to the same realization. He kept his deep voice neutral. I wished I could see his expression behind the mask.

“SteelHooves?” I asked cautiously. “Are you all right?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he asked, again keeping his voice neutral. Too neutral. He was refraining from something – whether it was laughing in joy or raging in offense, I couldn’t guess. “How about you? You’re not indulging in the looting, I notice. As Calamity would say, it’s not like these creatures are using anything here anymore. Might as well go to our use.”

To SteelHooves: looting ghouls was okay but looting Steel Rangers was not? I didn’t like that, although with consideration I had to admit to myself that I would probably react considerably worse towards the looting of the bodies of stable dwellers.

“I’m going to burn them,” I announced. “As soon as Calamity is done scavenging. If you want, you should join him in that.”

“Interesting,” SteelHooves intoned, but remained with me.

I found his reaction to my reaction as interesting as he apparently found my reaction to be. As morbid and repulsive as the setting was, I decided to attempt to fathom our new friend. “I… heard about the Steel Rangers. They don’t exactly have a… heroic reputation.”

"Is that how you see yourself?" he replied. "You're a hero?"

I flinched but quickly suspected he was deflecting. "How about you? How do you see yourself?"

"As a traditionalist."

Okay, what the hell did that mean? I tried again, "I'm told that most Steel Rangers are more interested in saving technology than saving ponies. How about you?"

SteelHooves was quiet.

I pressed. "Are you following us around to keep my PipBuck safe?"

SteelHooves snorted a laugh. Then, somberly, he revealed a little of himself. "Steel Rangers, each and every one, swear the same Oath. But there is some… divergence of opinion as to whether our fealty is owed to the Mare of the Ministry or to the Ministry Itself."

He spoke of "the Ministry" as if there was only one. Or, at least, only one of any importance.

"Are they that different?" I asked, but Calamity returned before I could get an answer, and SteelHooves was not willing to share with an audience.

"Ah think Ah got everythin' we might want."

"You have a strong back for a pegasus," SteelHooves ribbed. "Are you sure you don't want to get the furniture as well?"

Calamity grunted, flapping his wings. Ignoring the gibe of SteelHooves' comment, I considered the underlying truth. "Calamity, why don't you fly back and unload that stuff back at the suite. You can catch up with us. We'll still be on the Celestia Line."

Calamity smiled, tipping back his hat. "Will do!" Then he was off.

I focused, the bodies of the ghouls wrapping in light one by one. I levitated them into a pile. Then, walking out ahead on one of the monorails with SteelHooves following on the other, I reached a safe distance. I turned, floating up the zebra rifle, and sent half a clip into the mound of ghoul cadavers. The pile began to burn.

We reached Velvet Remedy, who was staring at the ghoulish pyre with strange fascination. I looked back, trying to figure out why the sight was held her gaze so.

A balefire phoenix was circling the bonfire of corpses.

* * *

> *"…repeating message. Again, this is Blackwing of Blackwing's Talons sending out a distress call on every friendly frequency. Please send this message on to any Talon companies in the area. My team and I are trapped on the roof of the Horseshoe Tower by enemy forces. We are low on ammo and cannot hold out much longer. Oh… oh no… here come more of them…!"*

The radio message ended abruptly, then looped, repeating the words of the female griffin. She sounded younger than Gawd and not as hard.

My PipBuck had started receiving the distress signal over a mile away from Horseshoe Tower. The signal was weak, but Horseshoe Tower had been one of the tallest buildings in all of Equestria, and was the largest skyscraper remaining in the Manehattan Ruins, easily dwarfing Tenpony Tower by over double its height.

"To anyone receiving this message, this is Blackwing of Blackwing's Talons. Please,

we need help. We're pinned on the roof of the Horseshoe Tower by overwhelming enemy forces. We are low on ammo and food, and we've lost three of our team already. We are in desperate need of assistance. If anyone can hear this message, please bring help. Please hurry! We can't hold out much longer. This is a repeating message. Again, this is Blackwing…"

I removed my earbloom and played the recording aloud as we got within a few blocks. I had hoped Calamity would catch up with us before we reached the skyscraper's Four Stars station, but I wasn't willing to wait. Each loop of the message pressed upon me mounting sense of urgency.

"We're going in," I announced. Then, reconsidering my words, "I'm going in. You two can stay behind if you want. I understand." I swished my tail. "Besides, somepony should let Calamity know where we are."

SteelHooves nickered. "Personally, I look forward to the chance to meet these noble ghoul-slayers." He looked at me. "And you are going because? Are you being a heroine? You enjoy risking your life for strangers? Or is there something else about Horseshoe Tower?"

I glared at my companion, then smirked. "Oh, I just want to know how a bunch of *griffins* could get trapped on the *roof* of a building."

SteelHooves chuckled. I turned to Velvet Remedy.

"You are *not* going in alone," Velvet insisted with a grim smile and a stomp. "And we can leave Calamity a note." She paused. "He *can* read, can't he?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, and you know it." Then considered the idea and found myself at a loss. I still had the clipboard and pencil that I had taken from the Tenpony Tower constabulary, but a note left under a chunk of crumbled concrete would be easily missed. For Calamity to see it, we'd need to paint the message in big letters on the roof of the station. And even then he would miss it if we didn't illuminate it somehow. I pointed these problems out to Velvet Remedy.

"In case you missed the light show earlier, dear, illumination will not be a problem," Velvet smiled wryly. "I can cast a spell on the letters that will make them quite eye-catching."

"Can you just make glowing words?"

Velvet Remedy shook her head. "Yes, but only if I stayed here to maintain them. To leave them behind, I would have to enchant existing writing. Paint, preferably, unless we can find a really big inkpot."

SteelHooves whinnied as he trotted past us to the station's double doors that lead into Horseshoe Tower. "Then we'll paint it in the blood of the first enemy we encounter." He turned and bucked the doors hard enough to not only swing them open but send one of them flying across the waiting room inside. I cringed and thanked the Goddesses that the room wasn't full of enemies. "Are you coming?"

* * *

I helped Velvet Remedy step over the body of the griffin, his bulk nearly doubled by the twin minigun battle saddle that was still strapped to his corpse. It was the first body that we had found which wasn't centuries old. The floor was littered with bullet casings, making walking around it treacherous.

I couldn't tell what killed him. That worried me. It worried me even more when Velvet Remedy diagnosed it as natural causes, her voice loaded with disbelief.

"At least we know they came this way," SteelHooves observed. "I was beginning to worry there was no way up."

Much of Horseshoe Tower's interiors had collapsed. Stairwells had crumbled, hallways had caved in. The entire building had become a maze, forcing us to weave in and out of rooms in order to make it from one end of a hallway to the other, making us go down a floor to find stairs that would take us up two.

Ahead we could hear the spray of water. My PipBuck starting click-clicking softly.

The only way to get to the next set of stairs was through a collapsed section of wall between two bathrooms. The building's water talisman was still pumping water through the shattered pipes. The water was alive with low levels of radiation. The balefire bomb had probably irradiated the talisman itself.

I checked with Velvet Remedy, making sure we had enough RadAway with us. The radioactive shower would be minor, nothing worth getting concerned about. But if this was a sign of bigger problems ahead, I wanted to be sure we were prepared.

Holding my breath, I pushed myself through the spray as quickly as I could. I stumbled a little as the wet floorboards on the other side gave an inch.

"Oooookie dokey lokey. SteelHooves, I'll be floating you through and setting you down over there," I said pointing at the far corner of the room near the doorway out. "This floor is not stable."

Velvet Remedy stayed back. I focused on SteelHooves, wrapping him in a telekinetic blanket. Slowly, I lifted the heavy Steel Ranger up half a yard and brought him through the shower. I took a single step back, feeling the floor wobble alarmingly once again, and glided him past me towards a corner that I was fairly certain would be dry and stable.

SteelHooves made it halfway there when something he saw through the open doorway caused him to thrash, trying to find purchase on the floor.

Before I could put him down, before I could even ask what he saw, the alicorn stepped into the doorway.

My levitation magic imploded as I gasped in shock. SteelHooves dropped hard, turning to fire at the alicorn, and the floor gave way beneath him. SteelHooves dropped out of sight. I heard splashes beneath. The alicorn took a step forward, looking down at the hole, and rest of the floor collapsed. The alicorn tried to thrust out her wings to fly, but they struck the sides of the doorframe and she fell into the floor below with him.

I found myself standing on a wet, sagging plank jutting out over the floor below like a diving board. Which was appropriate since the floor below was a swimming pool.

My PipBuck started click-click-clicking with great enthusiasm.

Scrambling on the floating debris, the alicorn thrashed. Her horn began to glow. SteelHooves was nowhere in sight, having surely sunk to the bottom.

I wished for the bag of grenades. I had to act fast, but my mind wasn't thinking fast enough! The alicorn would have her shield up before I had figured out what to do!

Ka-BLAM!!!

An explosion right next to my head blew out my eardrums. The world became a strained, high buzz. I immediately lost all sense of balance, tumbling from my position. I landed on a floating chunk of flooring that immediately began to capsize.

I grasped the chunk of floor telekinetically, letting out a scream I could feel but not hear. Focusing had become excruciating.

In front of me, I saw the alicorn floating in debris and blood. Velvet Remedy had blown a large chunk of the creature's neck away with the combat shotgun. It wasn't dead, but it was a race between blood loss and drowning as to which would finish her off first.

I watched in horror as it began to heal, the wound slowly closing.

They fucking *regenerate?*

That was *not fair!* That was *not* okay!

With a flash of anger, I started telekinetically grasping jagged, floating bits of floor and jabbing at the alicorn's neck until I had crudely sawed it off. The creature began to sink beneath the reddened, radioactive water.

⁂

Velvet Remedy crouched over me, her horn pointing at my left ear. She had already restored hearing to my right.

SteelHooved stood next to us on the edge of the swimming pool, dripping with water that was making my PipBuck clickity-click wildly. He was arguing with Velvet over how much RadAway he needed to drink. Velvet was leaning towards every last packet we had; SteelHooves was insisting he didn't need any at all.

My left ear began to mend.

"We don't have time for this," SteelHooves stomped, cracking the tiles under his armored hoof. "Those creatures always travel in groups."

"Then take the RadAway and stop being a baby," my shotgun surgeon spat back, glowering. "Seriously, do all my patients have to be so difficult?"

I wanted to point out that I was laying there being very non-difficult, thank you.

SteelHooves bristled at that. Finally, I spoke up. "SteelHooves, tell her."

Both of them turned to stare at me. Or, at least, I assumed SteelHooves was staring at me. His visor was pointed in my direction.

"Tell me what?" Velvet asked me slowly. Then, turning to SteelHooves, "Tell. Me. What?"

SteelHooves was silent.

I sighed. "Look, if I was able to figure it out, so will she. She's smarter than I am."

I could tell Velvet Remedy was forcing herself not to react to the compliment.

SteelHooves finally relented.

"I'm a ghoul."

Velvet Remedy, to her credit, didn't take a step back. Didn't even gasp. She was just strangely quiet for a while. Long enough that I would have worried I had lost my hearing again if it wasn't for the drip, drip, drip on the tiles underneath the Steel Ranger.

"Radiation is… regenerative for ghouls," SteelHooves admitted. "I was more in danger of drowning." In truth, there had been little danger of that with the rebreather in his magically powered armor.

Of course, I realized, feeling slow and stupid: the alicorn was regenerating because she was in the pool. Radiation must effect them the same way.

"Well then, I guess you won't need the RadAway," Velvet Remedy concluded casually, slipping the packs back into one of her open medical boxes.

* * *

Knowing I was by far the most capable of stealth, I determined that I should scout ahead. I spotted the alicorn's two sisters in a room on the next floor. Their tails were to me, oblivious to my presence as they seemed to be focusing on trying to magically rip the door of a safe off its hinges. Their coats were a deep purple, almost black. And that was not all I noticed.

They have no cutie marks!

I slipped out my sniper rifle and slid into the zen of S.A.T.S.

BLAM!!

The first alicorn when down hard, brain blasting out the front of her skull to paint the safe she had been so focused on. The second began to turn, her shield already starting to form. But I was faster. And these creatures were not that much tougher than the rest of us if caught unawares and without their protective spells cast.

BLAM!!

I slipped out of S.A.T.S. as the second alicorn's body slumped to the floor. I looked at the safe, the splatter of blood, brains and bone reminding me that we never did go back and paint that note for Calamity.

Wait. Stop.

I'm looking at the gore from somepony… or at least some*thing* that I have just murdered… and I'm thinking *that?*

Am I really becoming that callous to the horrors and violence in the Equestrian Wasteland?

I wondered where this would fit on Monterey Jack's slide of loss-of-self.

I also wondered what the hell the alicorns had been after. So I trotted up to pick the lock. The safe, however, refused to be unlocked. After examination and struggling, I realized that it wasn't jammed or broken by the alicorns. I just wasn't good enough.

Well, I knew how to fix that.

I found myself smiling as the Party-Time Mint-al washed me clean of all the stupidity and dullness that was holding me back. I took a deep breath of relief! Finally, I was the real me again. My smile faded as I turned to see Velvet Remedy watching me sadly.

* * *

Three more alicorns stood on the other side of a gaping divide. At least five internal floors had collapsed, leaving a honeycomb of half-rooms ringing a massive pit. Motes of debris and ash floated in the void between us.

SteelHooves opened fire with his grenade machinegun, taking out one of them (and all the rooms around her) before she could fully erect her shield. The two others launched themselves into the air, spreading their wings as their shields bubbled around them.

I gave a prayer to Luna and floated out a memory orb, making sure it was the one of Pinkie Pie's last party, and not the one I had retrieved from the safe seven floors below. I began levitating the orb towards closer of the two.

The alicorn let out a wicked, bitter and majestic laugh that echoed off the walls of the pit. Using telekinesis of her own, she knocked it free of my telekinetic sheath with a hurled chair. The orb containing the memory of Pinkie Pie's last party plunged into the depths below, bounced, rolled and disappeared through a crack, lost forever.

The dark-purple coated alicorn's voice rumbled with undeniable superiority. "Do you think We are fools? We remember how you killed Us before!"

Oh we were so fucked!

"Run!" I yelled, turning tail and racing towards the stairs.

Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves galloped after me, overtaking me as I charged up out of the stairwell and into a hallway.

Turning, I ordered SteelHooves to collapse the entrance behind us. His grenade machinegun was useless against a shielded alicorn, but more than a match for the crumbling structure we were in. Concrete and wood rained down in a thunderous cloud of dust.

"What happened?" SteelHooves demanded.

Panting, I explained. "There's some sort of telepathy involved…" My fears had been proven true. "…not just between the ones that are together. All of them. Every time we kill one, they learn from it." I wouldn't be able to trick them the same way twice.

Our ploy bought us time, but not much. I could hear them on the other side, clearing a path to us.

With a flash of light, one of the alicorns appeared right between us.

"They can teleport *too!?"* Velvet Remedy blurted, finally reaching the same level of hateful disbelief I felt towards these creatures.

The alicorn herself seemed a little surprised. Apparently, teleporting into someplace you can't see was tricky work even for these creatures. I don't think she expected to be this close. Too bad she hadn't appeared a yard to either side, stuck herself in a wall. But no, we couldn't be that lucky.

Or could we? I realized something very peculiar. The alicorn's sphere of shielding was up at full strength, but she had appeared literally in the center of us. Parts of each of us were inside the barrier. Including SteelHooves's metal rear end.

The alicorn began casting a spell. I felt a vice tighten around my heart. My hooves began to tingle.

A *heart attack* spell? Feeling panic well up inside me as my heart struggled to beat, I suddenly knew how these creatures had killed the griffins through "natural causes".

"Move!" I yelled as I telekinetically grasped the sack of grenades. SteelHooves dashed forward, leaving the grenades inside the sack. Without opening it to reveal the contents, I focused and tried to pull as many of the pins as I could. Unfortunately, moving objects I couldn't directly see was as difficult for me as teleporting into an unknown space was for the alicorn. I only managed to pull the pins on three before I backed out of the shield.

The alicorn looked questioningly down at the sack as it fell to her feet. Her shield contained the explosion quite effectively. It was a gory and brilliant sight.

“Well, that would explain how griffins can get trapped on a roof,” I said flatly.

We had to fight through four more of the creatures before we made it to the roof. The combination of my stealth and SteelHooves’ massive firepower kept us alive, but it was getting harder. They were all alert for us now, and seemed to be coordinating their defenses. We had to run any time they got their spells up, and we were not fast enough to take out more than two before the others were able to cast their shields.

On the roof were four more alicorns. They were sitting, frozen, at the four corners of the building, their attentions focused inward. Instead of surrounding themselves with a sphere of protective magic, they were cooperatively maintaining a hemisphere of magical force that was keeping the three griffin mercs caged.

“New one on me,” SteelHooves muttered from beside me.

“Oh thank the Great Egg,” one of them blurted out, seeing us through the glowing shell of force that trapped her and the other two surviving griffins. She stopped. “Where are the rest of you?”

I looked around. Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves were flanking me. The Goddesses only knew where Calamity was. I suspected he was circling the Celestia line, hoping to spot us. I winced at the thought and hoped he wasn’t too worried. I could see the faintest suggestion of approaching dawn on the skyline.

A chill wind blew at my mane, bringing the salty smell of the harbor. It was almost a shame that we’d reached the roof in the dark of night. The view in the daytime must be amazing.

Then again, the view could also paralyze me with vertigo. So probably better we were here now after all. Turning back to the three griffins, “This is it. Just us.”

“Well, this isn’t much of a rescue,” one of the griffins said bitterly.

“Gratitude. Look it up.”

I turned away and looked over the alicorns. They were statuesque in their concentration. I wasn’t even sure they realized we were on the roof with them. And they were outside the shield they were creating. We could take three of them down with a coordinated attack. Surely the griffins could take out the last one. “What kind of firepower do you guys still have?

I could hear SteelHooves whistle as the griffin in the back stepped forward. She was wearing what looked like magically powered armor of her own, a griffin design – nowhere near as complicated or encompassing as SteelHooves, leaving her talons, legs and wings bare, as well as most of her face – with a huge, tri-barreled, biggest battle saddle I had ever seen.

“Dismounted AA cannon,” SteelHooves said appreciatively. I had no idea what that meant, but this looked like the non-magical-energy version of the plasma cannon that Calamity had used against the dragon.

Well, we definitely had the firepower.

“Only five shots left,” the griffin said glumly. Still, five shots from that thing should be more than…

“And there are four wings of these horny bastards on their way,” the first griffin announced. From her voice, I finally identified her as Blackwing. I noted mentally that I would not have chosen the word "horny" to describe the alicorns. Unless Blackwing knew something I did not.

"Four wings?" I asked. "You mean two more?"

"No," SteelHooves interjected. "She means twelve."

"Oh. Well… moonrocks." Made sense. A "wing" then must be a group of three. Explains why there were three of them hunting SteelHooves outside Fetlock.

"These four have just been keeping us pinned here while their reinforcements arrive," Blackwing informed us.

Wait…

I perked up. "We're okay, then. I'm pretty sure we took them out on the way up!" I mentally counted. One in the pool. Two at the safe. Three in the pit. One of those had lived, and joined up with three more. So we'd killed…

…nine. There were still three left. Somehow, we'd managed to go right past a whole wing of alicorns without either party realizing it.

And they would probably be bursting onto the roof any minute. We had to work fast!

* * *

I quickly laid out the plan and everyone started taking their positions. As they did so, I couldn't help but voice my suspicions to Blackwing: "What is it that you mercenaries were after in this place that these creatures want so badly?"

"Codes to crack a safe in the Ministry of Image on Ministry Walk," Blackwing said, surprisingly forthcoming. "Safe contains an artifact that our employer would really like to take possession of. Turns out, the 'goddess' these monsters serve wants it too."

"What kind of artifact?" I asked, as I levitated out Little Macintosh and checked the load. I was going to use a magic bullet for this, just to be sure.

"The Black Book. Well, the Black Book of something-or-other. A tome of some of the foulest zebra magics. Stuff that can tear a pony's soul apart, they say. Or raise spirits from the grave."

Necromancy.

The very thought that such spells and powers actually existed gave me nightmarish chills. To my knowledge, no pony had ever used such dark arts; it was horrifying to imagine that the zebras actually could. Necromancy wasn't even supposed to be real – just a horror story to scare young fillies at slumber parties.

If this was the sort of foulness the Ministry of Image was casting their nets to catch, the purging of books took on a whole new and terrifying light. I began to wonder if the purpose behind the confiscation of "ideologically incompatible" books wasn't, at least in part, a smokescreen for this. Because by the Goddesses, you *couldn't* tell the public that the zebras had necromancy, much less that books on the stuff were slipping into Equestria!

The notion of zebra necromancy breathed an uncomfortable new dimension into how being on the fringe of a megaspell event turned ponies in to ghoul-ponies and zombie-ponies.

While I was talking to Blackwing and pondering the implications of the Black Book, SteelHooves and Velvet Remedy were discussing our foes. I caught the end of the conversation.

"…don't all have the same spells. Only the deep purple-coated ones like the wings below can teleport," SteelHooves explained to her. "The midnight blue coats…"

"Invisibility," Velvet Remedy interjected. "Oh yes. I remember."

"The dark green ones? I haven't seen them do anything the others can't do." SteelHooves walked up close to one of the statue-like alicorns and took a close look at its coat, a forest green so deep it was nearly black. "Until now."

Butcher, the griffin with the heavy gun stood at the ready in front of the farthest alicorn. SteelHooves had locked onto the one on my left. Velvet Remedy had her (formerly my) combat shotgun hovering an inch from the temple of the one on my right. I floated Little Macintosh between the eyes of the one in front of me.

"On the count of three. One… Two…"

In a thunderous crash of gunshot and explosions, three alicorns went down. So went the shield. The last alicorn immediately sprang to life, alert and…

…the griffin's supergun let out a boom that could be heard on the moon. The fourth alicorn was simply no more.

Blackwing swooped forward and took me in his talons as the other lightly encumbered griffin scooped up Velvet, taking off into the air. I threw a telekinetic sheath around SteelHooves, carrying him with us. The last griffin took off, circling to cover our tail.

We were a few blocks away when the last three alicorns burst onto the roof. Part of me wanted to laugh tauntingly. Then they reminded us that they could fly too. And, unencumbered, they were much faster and more maneuverable.

Wrapping themselves in magical shields, they swooped to close the distance.

I closed my eyes, trying to force my PTM-enhanced brain to think of something. For the first time, Party-Time Mint-als were failing me.

"Well now, y'all look like ya c'n use some help!"

Only once before had I ever been so happy to hear Calamity's voice and that was when I was facing a dragon. I opened my eyes, staring to him thankfully. "I hope you have a plan. Cuz I've got nothing."

"Y'all just follow me!" Calamity smiled and shot out ahead of us, dropping altitude.

Turns out, the one direction that heavily-laden griffins could fly even faster than alicorns was down. They gave chase, but we were pulling ahead.

"Unless we're diving for a mattress factory," Blackwing squawked, "This'll be a really short trip!"

I glanced back. There was good distance between us and the three creatures, now only visible as glowing bubbles of sickly green energy that zipped through the sky towards us.

"Start pulling up now!" Calamity called back.

"Does he have any idea…" the griffin carrying Velvet Remedy grunted, "how hard it is… to pull up… at this speed… carrying this much weight?"

I could see the street coming up fast as we began to level. I smiled, thinking of just how much junk Calamity had a habit of scavenging. I had no doubt that the answer was yes.

The three griffins finally pulled straight with only yards to spare, skimming over the tops of the taller wagons. I felt a hoof drag along the top of a passenger wagon. The alicorns were beginning to close the gap. Lightning ripped from one of their horns, shooting past us.

Up ahead, the street ended in a massive parking lot. Rows upon rows of delivery wagons were lined up before a long building. With the exceptional visual clarity provided by Party-Time Mint-als, I was able to make out a logo on the roof of the building as we approached it: a filled-in black omega symbol with a white earth pony seeming to levitate a package on her back.

I suddenly realized the plan. An eye-blink before Calamity started shooting.

I turned on my Eyes-Forwards Sparkle, making a quick scan for life down there. I only had a moment, but at least I had Party-Time Mint-als boosting my keenness and judgement. All I was seeing were red blips scurrying about, below. Probably radroaches. I could hear a series of pops as we shot past the delivery wagons and over the rooftop.

The alicorns were just reaching the parking lot, moving too fast to stop, when the first delivery wagons exploded like megaspell bombs in extreme miniature. The first explosions instantly set off the rest, and three city blocks erupted in a vibrant cascade of insanely-colored light.

Their shields couldn't protect them against *that.* The blast of radiation couldn't heal them from a force that ripped them apart beneath a cellular level. They could not even mentally scream. There was no time. The three alicorns were simply gone.

The building shielded us just enough to save us before it was vaporized. My PipBuck screamed as we were hit by a wash of heat and radiation. My E.F.S. flashed a red warning that I was suffering radiation poisoning before it collapsed altogether, my PipBuck crashing.

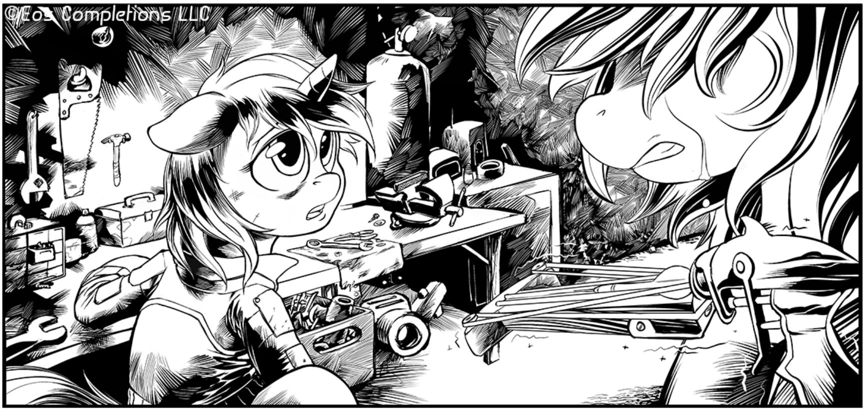
A moment later, we crashed too.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Mighty Telekinesis (level three) – Your telekinesis is Twilight Sparkle tier. You can handle multiple objects with ease; and with enough focus, you could probably carry around an Ursa Minor!

Chapter Nineteen

Betrayal



"Tell me that my friends are all lying to me and avoiding me because they don't like my parties and they don't want to be my friends anymore!"

Addiction.

How do you know when you're trapped? When you want something more than anything else? When you find yourself lying to your friends and hiding things from them because you don't want them to know? When you can't go a week without indulging? A day?

Or simply when you insisted that because none of the above really applied to you, you were fine?

We had crashed and everything went black, like somebody blowing out a candle. I was lying on the street, knocked out and badly hurt. But in the depths of my unconsciousness, I was still crashing. Pinkie Pie's last message plagued my dreams. By the time I regained consciousness, the Party-Time Mint-al had worn off, and I was back in the mire of my own feebleness. Even the multi-colored pyrotechnic display that consumed three city blocks behind us failed to fully pierce through my mental fog with its brilliance. As I peeled myself off the rubble-strewn street, my mind's eye could still see that skeleton, alone in a corner… a clutched figure of a friend having fallen into her ribcage.

And still all I wanted was another Party-Time Mint-al. To clear the fog and confusion. To make me brilliant so I could help my friends.

In that moment, I realized that even if I didn't meet any of the criteria on my own mental checklist of "warning signs", I risked losing control. *I* still chose whether I took a PTM or not, and I could refuse at any time. But… I had reached a point where I didn't feel right – didn't even feel like myself – unless I had that clarifying and enlightening boost from Party-Time Mint-als.

Maybe, just maybe, I did have a problem?

* * *

"Yee-HAW!" Calamity cried out triumphantly as he fluttered back to the rest of us. "Now that's how ya do it Dashite-style!"

SteelHooves groaned deeply as the metal-clad Steel Ranger pushed himself to his armored hooves. "For the record," he grumbled, "Nopony here is allowed to complain about *my* battle tactics being excessive ever again."

"Aaaaugh!" one of the griffins (Butcher, I think) cried out. "My wing! I think it's broken…"

Velvet Remedy dragged herself out of the wreckage of the overturned wagon she had landed in. Her own body torn and bleeding, particularly a deep gash on her forehead, but she ignored her own wounds, hobbling towards the badly injured griffin. About halfway to the griffin, she stopped, standing shakily as she gazed at the swirling, prismatic fire behind us.

"Merciful Celestia. I hope nopony was living in any of those buildings!"

Calamity landed proudly next to her. "Of course not. Cleared the raiders out of that pit yesterday evening, remember?"

We did what when?

Velvet Remedy swayed a bit and reached up to wipe the stream of blood out of her eye. "Oh… You mean when you flew off and left the rest of us worried sick about you?" She put her hoof down and took one more step towards her intended patient, saying, "I… I'll help. Hold still…"

She made it three more steps before fainting. "Whoa there!" Calamity exclaimed as he caught her before she could hit the pavement. He held onto Velvet as she slumped.

I tried to trot over to her, only to find I was lying down. That seemed surprising. I tried to get up, and sharp agony lanced through my right foreleg. I lifted it, trying to understand what was wrong… it felt heavy. My eyes took in the spear of rebar jutting through it, just above the dead screen of my PipBuck.

"oh. That's not good…"

I looked up to see the dark form of am armored griffin approaching me, then my eyes rolled up and I lost consciousness again.

* * *

"…had already acquired the codes when they started boxing us in. We thought it was a stroke of luck that they were pushing us towards the roof, but those bitches had turned our escape route into a trap."

I woke up for the second time to the sound of Blackwing and SteelHooves deep in discussion. I didn't think I had passed out for more than a few minutes. I felt weaker than I had back when I was sick in SteelHooves' cabin, deeply ill, and my right foreleg throbbed with such pain that I couldn't hold back my tears.

"My team noticed alicorns checking out at least one other safe in the building," SteelHooves pointed out. "Did they know you had the codes already?"

Blackwing laughed. “Well, we sure didn’t advertise it!”

My attention drifted. The beauty of Velvet Remedy had settled down next to me while I was out. Velvet Remedy was kneeling over me, her healing horn glowing. It was a position that even I was getting tired of seeing her in. Her head was wrapped in magic-laced bandages, a large patch of red seeping into them over her mending wound.

“I hope you like the taste of RadAway, Littlepip,” she said, smiling and trying to sound casual. I could detect the strain in her voice no matter how well she hid it. “SteelHooves is the only one of us who won’t be guzzling a crateful if I can get Doctor Helpinghoof to sell us his stock.”

“Velvet… are you all right? You fell.”

Velvet smiled softly to me. “I have a concussion, but it shouldn’t be too serious. I’m more worried about you, Littlepip.”

Pfft. I’d be fine. A few healing potions and I’d be good as new. I told her so. Velvet winced. Why did she wince?

“Littlepip… You can’t take a healing potion. Not while that *thing* is still in you.” I looked at the bloody, ribbed metal javelin that grotesquely skewered my foreleg. Velvet Remedy continued, “My magic and our medicine can patch you up, yes. But that metal rod has to come out first.”

This was going to hurt, wasn’t it?

Velvet Remedy assured me that it was going to hurt a *LOT.*

I floated out the memory orb from Horseshoe Tower, contemplating it a moment. The lock on that safe had been the hardest I’d ever tried to crack. It had been beyond the magical abilities of two alicorns. What secrets could it have been hiding. According to Blackwing, the mercenaries had already found the codes they were looking for elsewhere in the building. Of course, the alicorns didn’t know that for sure. They were probably just being thorough.

“On the count of three?” I suggested to Velvet Remedy. She nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line.

“One… Two…”

I reached out with my magic and touched the orb. Even as Velvet Remedy’s horn flared and the shaft of rebar was enveloped with light, all my senses dropped away into another world.

* * *

I was sitting before banks of terminals, between two other ponies that I paid absolutely no attention to. There was an earbloom buzzing softly in my ear. The screen on the terminal was nothing but a little balloon icon expanding until it popped, then filling again.

The pony I was riding was achy from sitting in the same position for too long. Her mane itched, as did…

Yikes! Okay, *his* mane itched. As well as *other places.* And I suddenly very, very much wanted to be back in the Manehattan Ruins feeling rebar being yanked through my leg instead.

The little balloon popped again and then was replaced by text.

Audio transmission intercepted.
Transmission Originates: Orange Residence, Horseshoe Tower, Manehattan
Transmission Received: [][][][][][]
Transmission Destination Encrypted.
Logging call. Operation Oversight Required.

"Perfect," I heard and felt the buck say through my mouth in an utterly bored voice. I felt my hoof punch a button without looking at it. The static in my ear was replaced by voices.

"…staying with mah Uncle and Auntie Orange."

I immediately recognized Apple Bloom's voice. There was an odd timbre and hoarseness to it, like she had been crying a lot, but was now all cried out.

My host picked up a pencil in his mouth and started doodling on a notepad. I could taste the eraser, and feel the little bite marks on the wooden shaft. I tried to focus on taste and sight and sound, ignoring other senses sternly.

"Is there any word?" The other voice was that of Sweetie Belle. She sounded nervous? Worried?

More words materialized on the screen before me.

Illegal Encryption Broken.
Transmission Received: Pony Perfection, Canterlot
Proceed with voice analysis?

The buck I was riding sighed loudly and hit another button.

Then went back to doodling, only half-watching the screen.

Voice Analysis in progress.

"No," Apple Bloom claimed dourly. "The doctor ponies say sis will pull through, but…"

"…But?" Sweetie Belle sounded like she was afraid to hear the answer. "I mean, that's wonderful news, right? Why don't you sound happy?"

Apple Bloom's voice dropped low. I felt myself sitting up a little. Apparently, ponies who were trying to be quiet warranted at least a little attention.

"There's… a rumor," Apple Bloom confided to her friend. "Some folks 're sayin' that maybe t'wasn't so much of an accident."

"What?" Sweetie Belle gasped, her voice dropping to a whisper even in her shock. "Who would want to hurt Applejack?"

The screen flashed as new information spilled out rapidly. Somewhere, a maneframe had just figured out who was talking, and about what. Now the screen and the earbloom had my host's full attention.

"They say… that maybe t'was somepony within 'er own Ministry."

Sweetie Belle was silent on the other end. In the background, I could hear somepony crying, a soft, heartbreaking weeping; but I couldn't tell whether it was from the unicorn's end or the earth pony's. I didn't have to wonder long.

"What the hay's goin' on over there? Sweetie Belle, where are ya calling from? Is everything all right?" And then, as a darker thought seemed to hit the mare, "Did yer sister have an 'accident' too?"

"What? Oh, oh no. My sister is fine. We're… we're at that spa on Leaf Fall Lane.

Rarity's been here all afternoon trying to get Fluttershy to stop crying."

"What… about Applejack?"

Sweetie Belle sounded guilty. "uh… no. I don't think they even know about what happened yet. Rarity called me over a few hours ago. Apparently, when Fluttershy missed their weekly treatment, Rarity went looking for her. She found Fluttershy curled up in a corner in her office at the Ministry of Peace. I don't really know what happened, but…"

And now it was Apple Bloom's turn. "But?"

"Fluttershy says that Rainbow Dash called her a traitor!"

"What?!" Apple Bloom wasn't able to keep her voice down like Sweetie Belle could. I heard someone in the background call out questioningly.

Apple Bloom's voice became murky as she called back, "No, nothin's wrong, Uncle Orange. It's not the hospital. Ah'm just talkin' t' Sweetie Belle." Then, after a pause, she thoughtfully added, "Sounds like Rarity an' Fluttershy ain't gonna make it up right away."

Apple Bloom spoke clearly once again, addressing Sweetie Belle.

"Uh… I ought t' go. Twilight Sparkle's s'posed t' be 'porting in any minute now. She'll be staying with us until Applejack's outta critical," Apple Bloom explained, "An' you know how those teleports wreak havoc with these here terminals. Ah really think I could design one better in mah sleep… 'Sides, Scootaloo would have a right fit if she knew Ah was talkin' on an unsecured line."

"A traitor?! Apple Bloom, can you imagine? Rainbow Dash is her oldest friend. And even worse, she's the bearer of the Element of Loyalty!" Sweetie Belle sounded deeply pained. "That's kinda like… having loyalty itself call you a traitor!"

"Wonder how she'd like it if somepony called her a traitor," Apple Bloom seethed gloomily.

"How could Rainbow Dash say something like that?"

"I dunno," Apple Bloom replied, sounding offended. "Ah've given up tryin' t' understand anymore. Ah just want all this to be over."

"I know. It… everything… Sometimes I just want to dig a hole in the ground and hide until this whole stupid war is over."

The screen flashed.

Transmission Terminated on Receiving End.
Content Analysis proceeding.
Content Tagged Alpha Priority.
Oversight Memory Confirmation Required.
Please Report to your Supervisor.

I felt myself get up and shake loose the earbud. "Dammit. I hate memory extraction," I heard him grump from what felt like my mouth. "Hope those mares die in a fire."

* * *

I returned to a world of darkness and incredible pain. But at least I was a mare again. Biting back a scream, I smiled weakly up at Velvet Remedy who was wrapped my foreleg in healing bandages.

"That was clever," Velvet Remedy complimented as she floated a couple rejuvenating potions out of a medical box resting beside her. I noticed she wasn't wearing hers and looked around. I could have sworn she was wearing them before I blacked out the second time, but I couldn't remember if she was when I woke up.

Not far away, I saw Calamity working on her "saddlebags", replacing the battle damaged boxes with newer ones he had scavenged from… somewhere.

"Anything interesting?" Velvet Remedy asked, nodding her horn towards the memory orb.

I glanced down at the memory orb; the thoughts that it provoked battled for dominance in my head:

I had glimpsed hints that all was not well inside the Ministry of Technology before, but for anypony within the Ministry to have enough drive and animosity towards Applejack to plot her death… that took the conflict to a whole new level. That placed the call sometime after the death of Applejack's big brother and her corresponding exertion of greater control over her own Ministry. Probably even after Applesnack's memory. A new generation of magically-hardened terminals would explain why I kept finding functional ones in the Equestrian Wasteland. And if that call took place when I thought it did, that would explain why the vast majority of terminals were destroyed hunks of scrap. Only the ones deemed most vital or owned by ponies of wealth or prominence would have been upgraded.

I was also beginning to see the possibilities that Gawdyna Grimfeathers had recognized in an entire vault full of memories.

But those thoughts were distractions.

Most importantly, Velvet Remedy must never see this memory.

"Just some buck having a really boring day at work," I lied, floating it up and back towards my saddlebags. "How's the griffin with the broken wing?"

"She won't be able to fly for a while. Her injuries were much worse than when Calamity's wing got shot…" Velvet said, glancing towards the griffin in question. As soon as Velvet looked away, I gave the memory orb a telekinetic fling, sending it soaring into the night air. With luck, the toss would put it close enough to our Dashite's miniature armageddon that at least the poisonous memory would die in a fire.

* * *

"DJ Pon3 isn't telling the whole story," Blackwing insisted, speaking to SteelHooves. My metal-shrouded companion had oh-so-casually asked about the massacre of the ghoul ponies on the Celestia Line station. "Sure, Grim Star wanted them dead, but a few of the folk in Tenpony Tower, like that doc, were interested in a more amiable solution."

"Amiable?" SteelHooves said with disgust-tinged disbelief. "With *ghouls?*"

Blackwing hunched. "Yeah, well I've met a few ghoul-ponies in my day that were more respectable than most ponies out in the wasteland." The griffin's tone suggested there was more she wanted to add, but wasn't going to insult the Steel Ranger who had just helped save her life. "They aren't like zombie-ponies; although eventually… well, Sheriff Rottingtail was diving towards zombiehood, I'm pretty damn sure."

"Oh?" SteelHooves asked in a manipulatively conversational tone I was beginning to recognize. I wondered if I should be worried. Did Blackwing or her griffins have anything to fear from SteelHooves? How about the ponies of Tenpony Tower?

I didn't think so, but how well did I really know SteelHooves? How well could somepony know him when every show of opinion or emotion could be a cleverly crafted deception?

"Yeah. Sheriff Rottingtail didn't want cohabitation, even if some of the Tenpony folk were willing to give it a go. That bastard had plans to wipe out everypony in that Tower and take it for himself and his crew." Blackwing slashed at the air in disgust. "There's a whole flock of zombie-ponies in the maintenance tunnels near Tenpony Tower. He tried to pay us to unlock an old tunnel entrance so he could let them swarm the place."

SteelHooves was deathly silent for a moment. Then, "He tried to bribe you to break contract? Surely he had to know a griffin's honor wouldn't stand for that. Why didn't he just do it himself?"

I saw how Blackwing puffed up with pride. "The fool couldn't. Only unlocks from the inside."

"By Luna!" SteelHooves gasped. "I hope you told Chief Grim Star about this?"

A grimace formed on Blackwing's beak. "Actually…" She clawed at the ground. "I didn't see any point in fueling that jerk's bigotry after Sheriff Rottingtail had been taken out. Truth was, we didn't even go in with the plan to take out more than him and his thugs, but the whole damn place fell upon us the moment we took him down. Didn't have a choice but to kill them all."

SteelHooves nickered. "Well, who can blame you. But Grim Star needs to know about that potentially fatal flaw in Tenpony's security. Where is this old tunnel entrance, exactly?"

* * *

Butcher dropped her dismounted AA cannon battle saddle at my hooves. I blinked at her, not comprehending.

"Look, you saved our lives up there. We owe you," Butcher explained. "Blackwing would probably make you an honorary Talon if you were at least a pegasus. But since you're a unicorn, that just won't fly." She smirked at her own pun.

I stared down at the ridiculously huge gun. "I couldn't, really," I stammered, wondering just what the hell we would do with the thing if I accepted it. "You might need it."

"Yeah, well, I need my life more. And I have that thanks to you lot. Blackwing's Talons pay back their debts. And don't you deny that you could use her. *Little Gilda* here will beat a hole through an alicorn's shield if you can keep her on target for four or five shots of concentrated fire." She cocked her head. "Besides, the other idea was a set of our armor, but I don't think it would fit a pony."

Calamity flew up and hovered, staring at it. "Actually, Ah bet Ah could mount that girl onta SteelHooves' battle saddle…"

"Where?" SteelHooves' huge saddle already had a grenade machinegun on one side and a missile launcher on the other!

"On his back!" Calamity tipped his hat, warming to the idea. "Sure, she'd hafta be mounted aft-wards, so SteelHooves would hafta turn his tail t' the target t' shoot it, but if we rigged it into that fancy targeting magic…"

Oh no. I was stopping this insanity right there. SteelHooves, if anything, needed a weapon that was less overpowered; something he could safely shoot in hallways. "No… actually, how about you just owe us a favor?"

"I'm not much for owing favors that might come back to pluck my tail-feathers," Blackwing, finally done talking with SteelHooves, broke into the conversation. "But if you can think up something more acceptable by the end of the week, we should still be in the area."

Butcher looked to her team leader. "What's the plan?" She laid down next to her battle saddle and started pulling it on. It was clearly far too heavy to lift without telekinesis.

"Finish the contract. Deliver the codes and get our payment. After that?" Blackwing looked behind her at the one other remaining member of her team, who was being virtually mummified by Velvet Remedy.

"By the Egg," Blackwing swore, "I'll figure something out."

Calamity looked disappointed as Butcher re-saddled *Little Gilda.* "Ah dunno. How are we s'posed t' find ya?"

Blackwing fished a small device from her saddlebags. It looked a lot like a StealthBuck. "Here's a broadcaster. You can attach it to your PipBuck and use it to transmit radio messages as well as receive them. Your PipBuck isn't a radio tower, so you won't have much range, but if you picked up our transmissions, you already know what frequencies to call on."

I nodded, floating it into my own saddlebags. First, I had to restore the spell matrix of my PipBuck. I could do it from SteelHooves' suit just as I had the reverse. But it was a complicated procedure that I couldn't do while hurt. Or in the dark. Or probably without Party-Time Mint-als.

No… No, I *could* do it without them. Even if I didn't *feel* like I could. I'd done it before, dammit.

SteelHooves trotted up to join us. I was tempted to ask him about his somewhat ominous conversation with Blackwing, but he drew my attention elsewhere. "We're being watched. There's a sprite-bot that's been trying to get your attention without letting me know it's there."

Watcher.

⁂

I excused myself to the little fillies' pile-of-rubble. Sure enough, the sprite-bot floated up to me, silent as the sunset.

"Hello Littlepip!" Watcher tried to sound casual, but this wasn't a chance meeting. If it was, I would have heard music first. "What are you all doing way out here? And what was that explosion?"

I wondered if Watcher was the shy follower SteelHooves and I had noticed before. I decided to try the theory.

"Well, Calamity has been playing with fireworks and SteelHooves has been letting you secretly follow us around all day without his knowing," I said darkly. "What are you doing?"

"All day? I don't know what you mean, Littlepip. I just got here."

Likely story. Didn't matter. I needed Watcher's help. "Watcher, I need a favor. I need you to contact Gawdyna and tell her about Blackwing's Talons."

Watcher was silent long enough that I felt pressed to explain.

"Gawdyna's gathering up griffins who aren't currently under contract. Blackwing lost half her griffins to those alicorns and the survivors are badly wounded. They could use more help than we can give them. We ought to at least let Gawdyna give them the option…"

"No," the sprite-bot's mechanical voice intoned.

"No?" I sat back, surprised. "Look, we can help these people. Or do you only care about ponies?"

"I've been willing to help you before because it was to *save lives.* This isn't saving lives. It's more like a… vanity project. I don't reveal myself for a reason. Every time I do, it puts me at risk!"

Oh for the love of Luna. I turned away from the floating robot.

Then Watcher surprised me. "Fine. I'll do this for you. But you have to agree to do something for me. I have a quest for you."

"You have a what now?" I blinked, turning back and staring at the sprite-bot.

"There's a Black Opal in Tenpony Tower. It was stolen from me. I want it back."

Tentatively, I asked, "What's a Black Opal?"

"It's a special gemstone. It's like a memory orb, but used in a Recollector." Before I could ask what a Recollector was, Watcher enlightened me. "Memory orbs hold memories taken from others by unicorn magic, usually through force. A Recollector is an enchanted crown that someone can wear when they *want* to record what they are experiencing. Or to re-live such a recording. Even if the wearer isn't a unicorn."

I nodded. That sort of advancement made perfect sense. Like Apple Bloom's magic-resistant terminals, I suspected it was a step forward in arcano-technology that came awfully close to the end. Otherwise, I'd have been stumbling over them everywhere.

"So you want me to get a memory orb, sorta, out of Tenpony Tower and bring it to you. What, do I look like a courier pony?" I glowered. "But if this is what you require of me in order to be helpful, I'll do it. Where is the thing?"

"I believe it was taken by that radio pony, DJ Pon3. Retrieve it for me and I will relay your message."

Wait. *What?* Watcher wanted me to steal from Homage!?

"I… I…" I fought down a sense of inarticulate rage. "Okie… dokey… lokey. I'll see what I can do." My voice was sharp and even. "But you send the damn message first."

The sprite-bot hovered while Watcher seemed to contemplate this.

"Of course. Trust goes both ways."

Well, maybe. But Watcher just asked me to betray the trust of somepony I cared about. And right now I cared for and needed Homage a whole lot more than somepony hiding behind a spirte-bot and demanding favors in return for taking action. So I would ask Homage for the Black Opal. Nicely. And if she said no, Watcher was out of luck.

Suddenly, something else occurred to me. My eyes widened as I stared at Watcher's sprite-bot.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You haven't disappeared. All your little visits have been getting shorter. It's almost like every time I start to ask a question that you're uncomfortable with, your time in the sprite-bot conveniently ends. But now that you want something from me, you've…"

There was a burst of static and then happy marching music (heavy on tuba, drum and harmonica) poured out of the sprite-bot as Watcher ran out of time.

I wasn't buying it.

* * *

The sun was beginning to rise, painting the clouds above with magnificent colors and plunging the city into a maze of deep shadows.

I would have enjoyed the walk back if the lack of my Eyes-Forward Sparkle wasn't making me dread every corner and shadow, unable to tell where enemies were lurking. If my foreleg wasn't throbbing. If my head wasn't pounding and my stomach twisting and clenching brutally. I had already vomited up everything I'd eaten ever.

I had come to a conclusion: I hated radiation sickness. Quite a lot. Tenpony Tower, Homage and bed seemed forever away.

Velvet Remedy had passed the RadAway out between us (excluding SteelHooves) before Blackwing's Talons took their leave. What wouldn't quite have been enough to purge the radiation from three of us was spread far too thin serving six. Velvet Remedy kept assuring us that we would be fine once we made it back to Tenpony Tower and she could get more supplies. Even though we weren't saying anything. Which made me even more worried.

I distracted myself by thinking about the memory orb. And that lead me to thoughts about the Ministry of (Wartime) Technology. Which lead me to recall SteelHooves' comment about the Ministry. And who they helped.

Companies like Ironshod, Four Stars, Equestrian Robotics and even Stable-Tec.

Ironshod Firearms: where I first learned that all was not well in Applejack's world. Equestrian Robotics: I really knew nothing about them for sure, but I heavily suspected the nightmare fuel that was brain-bots could be laid at their hooves. Four-Stars: the traitorous ponies who sheltered and worked with zebra infiltrators and who were largely responsible for the deaths of millions. And Stable-Tec… and I already knew how that worked out.

Under the Ministry's guidance and support.

I was brought out of my thoughts by Velvet Remedy's gasp. I had fallen behind, due as much to my mental wanderings as my size and physical state. I tried to gallop up to where the rest of them were crouched behind a shattered wall, peeking out of half a window. Instead, I lurched and discovered that I actually did have just a little bit more I could throw up.

Wiping the sick from my muzzle with weak disgust, I approached a second window, not wanting to press close to the others after what I had done. Beside it was a metal desk; we were technically on the "inside" of the building, looking "out". I paused to open the desk, finding a dozen bottle caps.

My fogged mind insisted on asking why I kept finding bottle caps in places like this.

Desks. Trash cans. Lockers. Filing cabinets. What kind of pony went around putting money in random spots? What thought process leads to: *Oh, look! A desk in the urban wilderness. Let's put some caps in there. Not much – just enough to buy a sandwich…?*

I shook my head, trying to rid my mind of the cobwebs that entangled such thoughts. The thudding of my headache spiked, letting me know that was the wrong thing to do.

Blinking back tears, I looked "out" at the street. I heard the odd, fluttery commotion before I saw the source. When I did, my eyes went wide. A moment later, a ball of green flame lit up the street as the balefire phoenix set one of the bloodwings attacking it ablaze. I stood there, gaping.

Not all my companions were content to just watch. Levitating out her combat shotgun, Velvet Remedy stepped through her window, much to our surprise.

Velvet Remedy was never the first into combat. The range of creatures she was willing to use lethal force against was growing, and now included alicorns. But it had always been in self defense, or the defense of other ponies. As I saw Velvet take a battle stance, lifting the shotgun towards the aerial skirmish, I remembered what Monterey Jack had said, and wondered if I was slowly losing her to demands of the Equestrian Wasteland as well. Was she losing herself?

Velvet Remedy waited until the sight of the balefire phoenix was entirely blocked by the body of a bloodwing.

BLAM!!

The giant bat let out a piercing screech and fell to the ground. Velvet Remedy turned her aim to another one, waiting for the opportune moment.

The bats weren't going to give it to her. One of them broke off, diving at my friend. There was a twin gunshot as Calamity entered the fray, and the bloodwing crashed meatily at Velvet Remedy's hooves.

The sky flashed with gouts of green as the balefire phoenix tried to swoop back around on its attackers. One of the bloodwings turned and collided with the majestic green and golden bird, and the two ploughed inside of the hulk of a delivery wagon, crashing through crates filled with destroyed books. Part of me wondered if the books had been headed towards Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum.

The balefire phoenix was pinned under the bloodwing. I could see it struggling to get out. Another bloodwing fluttered down to the mouth of the delivery wagon, then flapped back quickly as the phoenix spat green balefire at it. The beautiful creature let out a mournful cry as the bloodwing twisted its head about to sink its fangs into the bird. The second bloodwing descended into the opening.

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy shouted in dismay. "Your zebra rifle!" I started, looking to her in confusion as my PTM-less brain struggled to parse what she wanted me to do.

Velvet Remedy wasn't willing to wait. Her horn flared as she wrenched the zebra rifle out of its holding straps and started firing it wildly into the back of the wagon. In seconds, the entire interior was ablaze. The bloodwings screeched in agony. One of them stumbled out, walking bizarrely on its burning wings, a living inferno. It collapsed in the street.

Nothing else, neither balefire phoenix nor second bloodwing, emerged from the raging furnace that the book wagon had become.

I looked from the wagon to Velvet Remedy and back blankly. "But the…" Velvet

Remedy gave me a strained glance, then returned to staring into the fire.

As I struggled to finish the thought, a blast of ash shot from the flames. It swirled in the morning air, catching the rays of sunlight as they pierced through the apocalyptic cityscape, spinning on a wind all its own. Then with a blinding burst of emerald light pierced with gold, the balefire phoenix appeared.

Velvet Remedy gave a joyous squee. She watched as the strange but magnificent creature circled around us thrice, let out a musical cry, and soared off.

Floating the zebra rifle back to me, she smirked. "Not the same relationship with being burned alive, remember?"

⁂

"When we get back, I'm taking a long bath," Velvet Remedy announced. "I'll get the RadAway as soon as Doctor Helpinghoof's clinic opens. At this rate, it won't be long after we return."

"Gaul-dangit, when we get back *Ah'm* takin' a long bath!" Calamity exclaimed, prompting Velvet to mock-faint.

I just wanted to sleep. Preferably beside Homage. "I'm…" I stopped, my mind fighting sickness, PTM-withdrawl and now sleep deprivation. "I dunno. I need sleep. But we don't have much time."

"Don't 'have much time? B'fore what?"

"Before Monterey Jack is executed," I told Calamity bluntly. "We have to save him."

The others, all of them, stopped in their tracks.

"We have t' what now?" Calamity asked, as if I'd told him we all had to get bitten by rattlesnakes.

"Sorry. I didn't mean that," I said, realizing my error. *"I* have to save him."

"Pardon, but Ah still don't think Ah heard that."

"May I ask why?" Velvet Remedy questioned.

"Not to mention how?" SteelHooves added.

I turned to look at my surprised and uncooperative friends. It dawned on me that I had never mentioned to them my intention to save the unpleasant beige unicorn.

"Ah say let 'im hang!" Calamity said, landing with an authoritative all-hoof stomp.

"You just met…" Velvet Remedy began, then stopped. "You're going to get us all kicked out of Tenpony Tower to save the pony who tried to rob you? That is, if the guards don't simply gun you down. Even though he confessed?"

I felt myself shaking. I was in no condition to be having this argument. Couldn't they all just see that this was the right thing to do?

"Dammit, Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy was suddenly mad at me. Why was she mad at me? "Monterey Jack doesn't get to do this! You saved that miserable bastard's life, and he repaid you by trying to screw you! He doesn't get to cheat you out of happiness too!"

I recoiled from Velvet Remedy's language as much as her anger.

"I agree," SteelHooves said simply.

Finally, I shot back at them, focusing on Velvet Remedy. "It doesn't matter! It doesn't matter if he's worthy of saving or not. Everyone on the battlefield, Fluttershy said, right? That buck has kids! Two colts and a filly. What do you think will happen to them if he dies? Does Tenpony Tower strike you as the sort of place that comprehends charity? Did any of you see an orphanage in there while you were shopping around?”

I turned to Calamity and SteelHooves. “It doesn’t matter what I could lose if I do. But how about what I’ll lose if I don’t even try?”

Sometimes, to do what’s right, you have to become the villain of the piece.

My friends all took a step back from me. They looked to each other as if wondering who should speak first. Finally, SteelHooves stepped forward. “Well then, what’s the plan?”

Breathing a huge sigh of relief (and feeling suddenly so dizzy I had to fight not to drop to my knees), I explained:

“I have one StealthBuck left. I sneak in. Shoot him with a dart. Just one; the poison will paralyze him for a few hours but have no lasting effects. Then I pick the lock and float him onto my back. I’ll use my levitation to lessen his weight. As long as I’m actually carrying him, the invisibility spell should cover both of us, just like it covers my saddlebags.”

Velvet Remedy’s eyes were wet, but she stepped forward. “In that case, we have something we must do before I can take my bath.”

I looked to her questioningly, hopefully.

“We need to stop by that workstation so you can build a new dart gun.”

* * *

I was dead on my hooves.

I could barely stand up; the workbench seemed to swim before me. Velvet Remedy was by my side though, encouraging me gently. Her attitude seemed to have completely changed after I mentioned the children. I was surprised but unquestioningly pleased.

“It’s okay. You can do it. Just focus.”

I nodded to Velvet’s voice as I wonderglued the pieces of seemingly random junk into a potent hoof-made weapon. “There… it just needs to dry now.”

Velvet Remedy nodded and gave me a little nuzzle. “Your heart is always in the right place, Littlepip.” She backed up, giving me a sad smile. “Your mind maybe not so much. But I’ve learned to believe in your heart…” She looked down, scuffing the floor with her hoof. “I do care about you, you know.”

I felt my heart flutter and my head swim. What was this? This wasn’t her trying to hurt Calamity. Was she coming on to me? After pushing me towards Homage yesterday? No… I had to be reading this wrong.

I looked away, aching because I knew Homage was so close. My eyes caught a bit of red in the far corner under a blanket. “Hey…uh… Velvet, is that your wagon?” I asked, suspecting she had left it up here the morning before. I pictured Homage finding it and carefully setting it aside, even covering it… although I couldn’t remember Velvet bringing it in the first place.

I looked to her again, and the thought left me. She looked beautiful and heart achingly sad. Her eyes were glistening again, but she changed the subject. “How long?” she deflected, glancing again at the dart gun.

“Oh, wonderglue is…” I searched for a good word and failed. “Wondrous. No time at all. Hell, it's probably ready now."

"You have all the darts you need?"

"Only should need one." Although, I had to admit, I'd need a few dozen in the state I was in. I would be lucky to hit a barn door.

"Let me see," Velvet cooed. I floated out one of my poisoned darts and set it into the dart gun. Velvet Remedy wrapped her telekinesis around it and lifted it to her eye, checking the alignment. It occurred to me that a non-lethal weapon like the dart gun should hold quite the appeal for my more pacifistic friend.

I remembered my earlier worries. How much would Velvet Remedy benefit, psychologically and spiritually, from being able to handle enemies without further soaking her own hooves in blood and death? Dammit, why didn't I think of this before?

I turned to her, the promise to make her a dart gun of her own wet on my lips. And froze in bewilderment. Velvet Remedy had the dart gun pointed right at me. Didn't she know that wasn't safe?

Thwap!

Ow! I opened my mouth, words of surprise frozen on my tongue.

Velvet Remedy shed a tear as she said, "I'm sorry, Littlepip."

What… What was happening?

Velvet Remedy's horn glowed a little brighter. I heard the squeaking as the small red wagon rolled over, stopping behind me. Velvet Remedy stepped closer and gave me a gentle nudge with one hoof, tipping my paralyzed body onto the wagon.

She'd shot me *on purpose!*

As Velvet Remedy floated the blanket over me, covering my body, I swore I'd kill her.

⁂

I don't know when I lost consciousness. The last moments I remembered were of feeling the vibration of the elevator through the metal edges of the wagon. A wagon which I should note had been very uncomfortable. I hadn't been able to see anything, and the only thing I could smell was the damn blanket. Mentally, I had realized I should be either seething with rage or sick with worry, perhaps even fearing for my life. But I had been too ill and too exhausted to have any emotions left.

I probably fell asleep.

Now, I found myself waking to the horrifyingly familiar sensation of being strapped to a medical table. A shot of panic went through me, driving me to struggle against the straps holding me down as I imagined that the psychotic ghoul doctor had somehow regenerated and captured me again. With Velvet Remedy's help!

I collapsed back, a black ache growing in my heart. How could she do this? She was supposed to be my friend!

I realized just how utterly horrible I felt. Beyond heartache, beyond headache and physical illness. I felt deeply and unbearably wrong inside. Was this how Taint felt? I tossed my head back onto my pillow (a little surprised my captors had thought to give me one).

Above me, somepony had nailed a poster to the wall. A very young mare dressed in a pink and yellow-striped nurse's uniform stared back at me, telling me how I didn't need to be a Steel Ranger to be a hero. Apparently, heroic positions like "Bedpan Unsullification Technician" and "Cancer Ward Clown" awaited me.

Not the Red Racer factory. My eyes strayed around. The medical bed I was strapped to was partitioned off by screens. I could see the silhouettes of ponies moving about beyond. The only thing in here with me was a strange, beeping terminal and several plastic tubes that were delivering fluids into and out of my body.

One of the shadows was Calamity. I could tell by the shape of his hat.

Dammit, NO! *Not him too!* Celestia and Luna damn them both to the burning…

"Dagnabbit," I heard Calamity speak, addressing one of the other ponies in the room, "Remember when we talked 'bout doin' this the right way? Well, this. Ain't. It."

"Do you think I wanted to do this?" Velvet Remedy's voice carried through the gauzy screens that locked me away. There was heartache in her voice. Good! "Littlepip forced my hoof."

"And how 'xactly did she do that? Ah seem t' recall her bein' barely able t' walk straight."

Suddenly, my body started to feel really heavy. Like a great leaden blanket was pressing down on me.

"Don't be naive! You heard her. Monterey Jack's execution is tomorrow. She was going to get herself kicked out of this place before we had any chance to persuade her to seek treatment."

Oh. *That's* what this was.

I opened my mouth to say something, but that heaviness washed over my eyelids and I couldn't keep them open.

⁂

When I awoke again, I felt… better.

I was tired and weak, weary to my very bones, but in a way that felt normal. The headache and sickness were gone. I could see, hear, feel, *think.* Clearly. There was no fog to fight through.

I tried to sit up, but I was still firmly bound to the medical bed. A shot of panic went through me, but I fought to stifle it. I wasn't back there. I wasn't in the mad ghoul's lab. This was different. And if I kept telling myself that, maybe my body would listen and my heart would slow to normal.

I laid back, already feeling exhausted by my effort to rise. I didn't have the energy to fight it, but I did have enough to start to get mad. The only friends I'd ever had in my life had conspired against me. Velvet Remedy had paralyzed me. They had me strapped to a bed in a clinic barely a day after my terrifying experience with the ghoul doctor. They had force me into…

By the mercy of moon-banishment, I *knew* I had a problem. It wasn't as if I was stupid. I just… Hell, I would have come here on my own. Eventually. I would have; I just had more important, pressing things…

A shadow moved up to the partition, and one of the screens was pulled away. A dark tan earth pony trotted into my little prison. Beyond him, I could see Velvet Remedy curled up on a bench. Her horn was glowing and a memory orb lay on the bench in front of her. She had retreated into the Fluttershy Orb again.

Goddesses! As if Velvet Remedy didn't have problems of her own.

I felt something hard in the pit of my stomach. I had every right to be furious with her, and I was. But I couldn't be hateful. Instead, even with my anger on, I felt a pang of worry for her.

"Well, good morning," the stallion said. "I'm Doctor Helpinghoof. And you, I've been told, are Littlepip. How are you feeling this morning?"

I turned my anger towards him. I didn't know quite how much of it he deserved, but it was at least some. After all, he'd agreed to put me through his addiction cure very much without my permission; I was paralyzed at the time. Plus, he was very, very convenient.

"That's a really stupid name."

The doctor took none of the intended offense. "Yes, I suppose you're right. I changed my name when I decided to take over the clinic. The Helpinghoof Clinics were prewar centers for aid and rehabilitation. Maybe it was presumptuous of me."

I sighed and shook my head. "No. That… makes sense." Doctor Helpinghoof was a… homage to the Helpinghoof Clinics. I felt a smile curling my muzzle despite myself. I fought it off, finding my righteous anger again.

"Why am I strapped down?!" I demanded.

Helpinghoof genially answered, "The addiction treatment involves a complete flushing of your system. You really don't want to pull out any of the tubes while the process is in progress. You could cause yourself permanent harm."

Oh. "But, why am I *still* strapped down?"

"Well, honestly, because the first reaction of most patients in your position is to gallop off. And all too often, imbibe more of whatever drug I just cleaned them of."

"My choice, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's certainly true. And with friends like yours, I have no doubt that you'd find yourself back here tomorrow if you did. I could make a tidy profit off of you."

I glared at the ceiling. "I need new friends!" I was rapidly running out of ones who hadn't shot me.

"That attitude is not unexpected. No good deed, and all those horseapples," the doctor said. "But in your case, I'm keeping you strapped until I'm sure you're not going to do something too exertive." I gave him a dark look, but he shrugged it off.

"When you came in here, Party-Time Mint-al addiction was hardly your only ailment. You were suffering severe radiation exposure. Not to mention a small dose of manticore poisoning. And your body had clearly been through enough traumas in the last few weeks that it was on the verge of giving out. I had to do a lot of work before I could risk even beginning the treatment." The doctor spoke with earnest warning, "These procedures have left you in a weak and fragile state. You'll heal properly now. But you need to take it easy for the next few days at least. No strenuous activity."

I remained quiet as that soaked in. How bad a shape had I been in? And if I was that messed up, how bad were the others. "Doctor, my… 'friends'? They've been through as much as I have. Please, they need your help too."

Helpinghoof nodded. "I know. Your unicorn friend already insisted. The Steel Ranger won't even let me take a look, but I've had both Calamity and Velvet Remedy on my table while you were in recovery."

Of course. SteelHooves wouldn't want anyone here realizing what he was. "Will they be okay?"

"Physically, yes," the doctor said. "Although I suspect how well they heal emotionally will be more up to you than to me."

Great. Drop that load on me too. I wasn't even going to get to be mad at them.

"Now, I want to talk to you a little bit about addictions," Helpinghoof informed me.

Perfect. And now the lecture. And he even had me strapped down for it.

"You should have noticed by now that your senses and thought processes seem clearer and cleaner. Not as hyper-enhanced as when you are on the drugs, but still a lot better than when you were off of them. Am I right?"

Grudgingly, I nodded.

"That's the nasty double-edge of Party-Time Mint-als. They are a brain accelerator made from mystical plants native only to zebra lands and perhaps the Everfree Forest. No matter how often you use them, they will always be just as effective as the first time. What most addicts don't realize, however, is that the withdrawal degrades your mental facilities. The more you take them, the worse you are when you're not on them. Ponies who have been taking them for years have reached the point where they can barely function without the drug in their system."

Helpinghoof smiled thinly. "The enlightened state in which you find yourself now is actually the way you always had been before you got hooked on Party-Time Mint-als."

What? I was like this before? But I felt so much more alert. Everything was so clear. It was so easy to think. Not hyper-fast like I could when I was on a PTM, but still *easy.* If this was what I was like before PTMs, why did it feel so new? And why wasn't I able to tell…

But I had been able to tell. I had known something was wrong for a long time. I felt a tear in my eye and I wondered where it had come from. I looked to the doctor.

"Now, I can give you advice, but I can't make you take it," the doctor continued. "You absolutely need to stay away from Party-Time Mint-als. It won't be easy. Your body and brain might no longer crave or need them, but most drug addiction is as psychological as it is physical. So I can't tell you this won't be difficult. But from what I hear, you have a strong will, and you have strong friends who can help you through it."

I nodded slowly, not really wanting to hear this, but knowing I needed to.

"And I highly recommend staying away from normal Mint-als, or for that matter any other addictive substances. Buck, Rage, Dash… all of them. Party-Time Mint-als is the most addictive drug out there, but many of the others aren't much better. And with your family history, you are more susceptible to addictions than most ponies; so my advice is to just stay away."

I started to nod again and stopped. Wait. "What does my family have to do with this?"

"Predisposition towards addiction can be hereditary," Helpinghoof informed me. "Your friend Velvet Remedy told me about your mother."

"My *mother?"* She had *no right!*

"She was an alcoholic, was she not?"

I ground my teeth, staring everywhere but at the doctor. He waited patiently until my spit and fury subsided enough to answer, "Well, her cutie mark was a glass of hard apple cider. What else was she going to do?"

"You do know that cutie marks don't control your destiny, right?"

I just looked away. I wasn't going to be roped into a discussion of my mother. Even if they kept me tied down for days.

Oh crap. Monterey! How long had I been out?

I tried to look at the time on my PipBuck but my foreleg was strapped down. And, I remembered swiftly, my PipBuck was dead anyway.

"Doctor," I said, trying not to sound too anxious. "How long until Monterey Jack is executed?" Please, Luna, give me the strength…

The doctor blinked. "The cheese shop owner? That was two hours ago." I felt an weight the size of a flower pot drop in my stomach. Followed by an anvil. "Why, did you know him?"

I had failed.

* * *

Velvet Remedy was the first to visit me, fresh from Fluttershy-land. She spoke cautiously, trotting on eggshells. As she did so, her horn glowed as she removed the straps holding me down, one at a time. I resisted the urge to go for her throat. No strenuous activity, the doctor had said.

"I don't expect you to forgive me…" Velvet was saying.

"Good," I interrupted harshly. "Because I don't."

She winced at my words, but obstinately continued, "…or that things will be right between us. But I do expect you to understand why. And to understand why I had to do it now."

"Why you felt you had to do it now, you mean," I spat. "And against my will."

"You wouldn't have gotten the help you needed on your own. This might be the only place in the whole Equestrian Wasteland that could help you, and you were about to throw it away."

"I had already realized I had a problem," I retorted. "I was going to ask for help."

"Oh?" Velvet Remedy asked, trapped somewhere between shock and disbelief. "When?"

"After we crashed. I realized it then. And I was probably going to ask for help after I'd had some sleep."

"Convenient." She turned away from me. I didn't need to see her face to tell she was hiding tears. I could hear them in the tremble of her breath, see it in the shudder of her breast.

Arrrgh! I wanted to tear her to pieces with my teeth… and yet I couldn't bear to see her hurt. And I knew that if talked to her any more, I'd just hurt her more. Maybe she deserved it, but I didn't want to inflict more wounds.

"Velvet, you need to not be here."

She wiped a hoof across her face before looking at me. Her eyes were red and puffy, but she didn't let me see the actual tears.

"Because of what you did, Monterey Jack's children are without a guardian and will soon be without a home," I said sternly, staring at her. To her merit, she stood and took it.

I had asked the doctor what would become of them. I had been right that Tenpony Tower has nothing like an orphanage; I recalled the doctor's words: Tenpony Tower is a "meritocracy" according to Helpinghoof, not a socialist commune. Those who have not earned their right to be here, and who cannot afford the privilege to be here, have no place here. The colts and filly would be kicked out of the Tower at the end of the month.

"So you have to help fix it. Send SteelHooves in here. I need to talk to him. And have him bring my saddlebags and utility barding. I need to get my PipBuck running so I can send Blackwing's Talons a message. I'm calling in the favor they owe us; I'm going to have them take the children to Shattered Hoof." I frowned. It wasn't ideal, but it was a damn lot better than what those kids would face alone in the Manehattan Ruins.

"It will be your job to break the news to Monterey's children, and persuade them to go."

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened, immediately recognizing how emotionally painful the task I had given her would be. But she nodded, accepting the burden as due reward.

* * *

"Ah'm so sorry, Li'lpip," Calamity said, head in his hooves. He had slipped inside the partitions as soon as Velvet Remedy had left.

I took a deep breath and gingerly sat up. It was an effort to do so, but my head remained clear and my gut didn't lurch. It was blissful to not be sick or under the effects of withdrawl.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Calamity," I said, although the angry pony in the back of my head had a few differing opinions. "Velvet Remedy did this. And she… was right to want to help me. I needed help."

Calamity looked up to me. I was shocked to see deep pain in his eyes. "No, Littlepip. Ah have the most t' apologize fer. This is all muh fault! Ah'm the one who gave ya those zebra-damned mints in the first place."

Flaming sun-farts. Calamity was right. For the first time, I considered what seeing me losing it to those things must be doing to him. Had he been tearing himself up all this time? Oh merciful Celestia, what had I been doing to my friends?

Strenuous or not, I pushed myself from the medical bed and threw my forehooves around Calamity, nuzzling against his neck. I had no words, no idea what to say. But I hoped that if I hugged him long enough, he'd understand how forgiven he was, and how sorry I was.

* * *

I had a *lot* of apologizing to do.

"How are *you* doing?" I asked SteelHooves as I plugged my PipBuck up to his magically powered armor using tools from my utility barding.

"Shouldn't you be the one everypony is asking that?" SteelHooves deep voice questioned.

"I've been… out of it for a long time," I admitted. "I've missed things. Obvious things. Or, at least, been too slow in coming to them." I swallowed. "For example, you told me that the Ministry of Technology funded Four Stars. And then you discovered what they did. I can't imagine how that must have hit you…"

"I've been… dealing with it," SteelHooves cut me off.

"But you shouldn't have had to deal with it alone." I shook my head. "I'd focused on Velvet Remedy and Calamity, and I didn't even see that *all* my friends were hurting. Not just the loud ones."

SteelHooves nickered. "Thank you, Littlepip. But like I said, I'm handling it."

I nodded, respecting his determination. My PipBuck beeped, demanding my attention. "Okay. But I am here for you. Really here, now," I added. "If I can help at all. If you just need somepony to talk to."

"I'd rather not."

I shut up. For the next half of an hour, I focused on getting my PipBuck working again. By the time I was done, the little leg-worn device was operating more smoothly and efficiently than it had in months. I floated the broadcaster out of my saddlebags and sent Blackwing the message. She was annoyed by the task I required of her but more relieved that I'd contacted her so quickly, calling in the favor for something that didn't amount to anything worse than an annoyance.

"By the Great Egg, kid, I'm half tempted to call this three favors. But then, I'd have to figure out how many more I owed you for hooking us up with Gawdyna's Shattered Hoof operation. I was feeling like my wings had been pulled for a bit there."

"Thank you, Blackwing. Velvet Remedy will have the little ponies waiting for you at the Four Stars station at Tenpony Tower."

I cut the broadcast. SteelHooves remained silent for a while longer.

"Are you sure…?" I began to ask as I put my tools away.

"Littlepip, you're the sort of mare who makes me wish I was a better pony." He sounded… sad? "Only one other mare has ever made me feel that way. And sooner or later, you're bound to learn, just like she did, that I'm not a better pony."

SteelHooves walked out of Helpinghoof's clinic.

* * *

"Where's SteelHooves?"

"Should ya really be up, Li'lpip?" Calamity asked, his eyes widening with concern as I burst into the suite.

"Do you know where he is?" After SteelHooves had left, I had just stared. It took several minutes for the sinking sensation to fully prompt me to action. And by then, I had lost track of him.

"uh… well, last Ah saw, he was talkin' t' Chief Grim Star."

No! I turned and galloped for the elevator.

* * *

It took me too long – way too long – to find the door to the basement. I pushed myself beyond the point where I should have collapsed, racing an invisible clock. When I found the door, my state of alarm intensified. It should have been locked. Instead, the door hung slightly open. I dashed inside, then stopped, leaning against a cold concrete wall, fighting loss of breath.

The basement was a cluttered maze. The walls down here were too thick for my Eyes-Forward Sparkle to detect ponies, friend or foe, beyond the room I was in. I was forced to search by sight alone. Finally, in a back room, I found a heavy set of doors under an ancient warning sign whose paint was peeling:

Emergency Shelter
Authorized Unicorns Only

Like the door to the basement, these doors were open. My PipBuck lit up. One friendly pony.

"SteelHooves?"

I turned on the light of my PipBuck and saw the Steel Ranger standing in the gloom, facing another large door made of thick steel, inset with a tiny window of armored glass. There was a control panel inches from his raised right hoof.

"SteelHooves!" I called out, panting, a burning stitch in my sides. "Don't do it!"

The Steel Ranger lowered his armored hoof and turned to look at me. "Don't do what?" he asked so casually I wanted to scream.

"Don't let them in!"

The Steel Ranger cocked his head. "Oh. Don't worry, Littlepip. Nopony's getting in through this door. I've made sure it can't be used ever again."

What? Oh. Oh thank the Goddesses! I collapsed on the cold stone floor, feeling like I would never be able to stand again. But it was okay. All my fears had been in my head.

SteelHooves trotted up to me. "Did you really think I'd let in the zombie-ponies. That I'd allow all the innocent ponies in Tenpony Tower to perish? You really don't know me at all, do you."

He trotted past me, leaving me there.

No, I admitted, feeling utterly ashamed as well as beyond exhausted. No, I didn't know SteelHooves. And maybe it was time that I stopped thinking ill of my friends. Start trusting them more. They really are good ponies. And they really are trying to help.

My thoughts were interrupted by a thud. Chief Grim Star's face appeared on the other side of the window. Flesh had been torn from the side of his head. I could see him staring in with desperation and horror, pounding on the other side of the door.

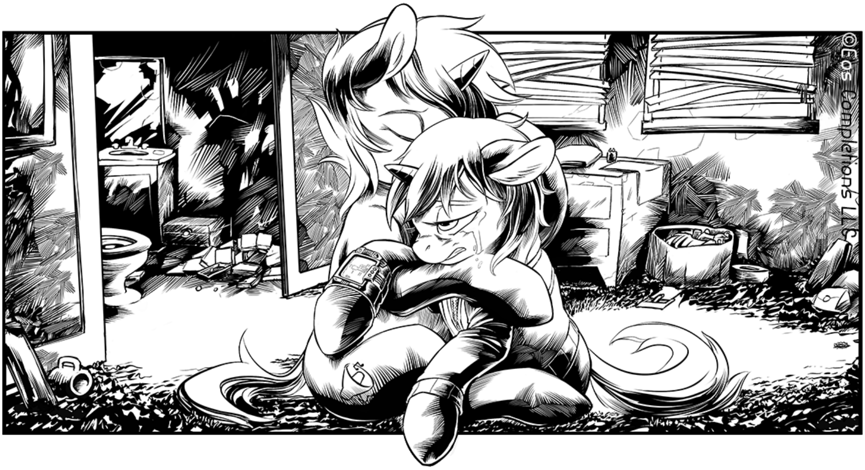
Then the zombie-ponies fell upon him once again, pulling him away from the window as they tore him to pieces, eating him alive.

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Reaper Pony's Gallop – If you kill a target while using S.A.T.S., 25% of your AP are restored after dropping the spell. This will usually refresh your targeting spell enough to use it again immediately for at least one more attack.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Behind the Curtain



"Can I do something for you? …Or to you?"

Failure.

I couldn't save Monterey Jack. I couldn't stop SteelHooves from murdering Chief Grim Star.

I was letting down my friends and everyone who needed me. The realization of what I had been doing to those closest to me with my damn addiction cut deep. And as much as I wanted to rage at Velvet Remedy, it was my fault that Monterey Jack was dead. I'd killed him with a mint. Actually, I'd killed him with a whole lot of them. I had been eating them like… dammit, they actually tasted like candy; how fucking wrong is that?

I was physically exhausted and mentally overwhelmed, on the verge of crying.

It took me a long time to pull myself up off the floor and make my way back. The basement was huge, cluttered, maze-like. I took a wrong turn and found myself in a room full of spark-powered generators, half of which were running, making the whole room seem to throb. A bank of them on the far wall were burned and blackened, their metal skins ruptured. One exploded generator was randomly sparking, making the air taste like lightning. The skeleton of a pony, severed in two by a hunk of metal shrapnel, rested forever on the floor a few yards from them. An engineering schematic on the wall told me these had been the generators which powered the Ministry's mystical defenses. They had given their lives saving the building and its inhabitants from the Manehattan balefire bomb… well, all except for one very unlucky maintenance pony. I wondered what her (or his) name had been. Did the pony have a family? Did they know what happened?

All moot two hundred years later. Just one more tear.

I backtracked and finally found my way to the exit. As I stepped out through the basement doorway, I was greeted by two of Tenpony Tower's guard ponies.

"Littlepip. You need to come with us."

I stared at them, then back to the open basement door. Was I being arrested? A weight sunk in my heart. They must think that I was responsible for the disappearance of Chief Grim Star. That was… fast. But then, I had been running around like a madpony earlier. And here I was, leaving the scene of the crime.

Because today just couldn't get any worse.

I nodded to the guards, saying nothing, and let them escort me to the constabulary offices. I'd been here before. I wondered if any of the ponies I had played seductress with in order to get a private audience with Monterey Jack would be there. They wouldn't need to execute me; I could simply die from embarrassment.

One thing was for sure. I wasn't going to say anything. I knew what SteelHooves had done, but what would be the use of pointing a hoof? I'd learned that lesson with Monterey Jack.

Ponies turned to stare as they marched me through the Tenpony Constabulary. I could half-hear the whispers that followed in my passing. I recognized a few of the guards on duty, including the one I had sweet-talked into giving me his pencil so I could write down all the ideas that my PTM-fueled brain had been devising. I dropped my head, wanting to crawl.

I glanced up as we passed several guard ponies talking with SteelHooves. From the look of things, he was here of his own volition. That did not bode well.

"In here, please," one of my escorts demanded. To my surprise, the door he swung open for me wasn't to a cell, but to a nice-looking office paneled in fake wood and full of bookshelves. "Take a seat. And don't wander off. Somepony will be with you shortly."

I looked to him in confusion.

"Sorry about the delays. We've had a situation with the Chief; you're not our first priority today."

* * *

I was so weary that I sank onto the little couch in the office and didn't move, waiting for what seemed like hours. I checked my PipBuck. It was getting late. I was hungry. And confused.

There was a small radio on a desk corner. I turned it on, wanting to lose myself in DJ Pon3's music. Instead, I was shocked to hear SteelHooves' deep voice rumble from the box.

> *"I'm no hero.*
>
> *"If you're looking for a hero, look to Chief Grim Star. He bravely sacrificed himself to save all of you. I only wish I could have saved him.*
>
> *"Sheriff Rottingtail had been gathering a veritable army of zombie-ponies in the maintenance tunnels surrounding Tenpony Tower. There is a door in the basement through which the Sheriff was going to unleash them upon the innocent residents of this tower. It would have been a slaughter. The Talons hired by the Chief learned of this threat, but were not pleased with how things went down (when I encountered the Talons there were considerably fewer of them than when Chief Grim Star hired them) so they neglected to inform the Chief of any of this, leaving all of your lives in*

> *jeopardy.*
>
> *"When I informed the Chief, he insisted we go down to investigate the Talons' story. We found the door and ventured through with the intention of making sure it could not be opened from the outside. We were destroying the terminal that controlled the door access from the maintenance tunnels when the zombie-ponies attacked us en masse. Only my armor saved me.*
>
> *"I still remember the Grim Star's last words, ordering me to flee, close the door, and make sure it was disabled from inside the Tower as well. He stayed back, fighting to the bitter end, sacrificing himself to give me the time needed. To make sure Tenpony Tower was, and is, safe."*

I stared at the radio. By Celestia's mane, he was actually going to pull this off, wasn't he? There was so much truth woven into the story that it would hold up to investigation. And anypony who questioned it would be questioning the heroism of Chief Grim Star. I knew different, but I was the only one, and it would be my word against his. My very non-citizen word. Not that I would say anything. I'd already made the mistake of going down that path.

DJ Pon3's voice was now on the radio.

> *"…from an interview an hour ago with one of my faithful assistants. The Tenpony Constabulary has confirmed the Steel Ranger's tale based on a computer entry left by Chief Grim Star…"*

Oh. Wait… was that why he trotted into here? My lockpicking skills seemed virtually unique, but I doubted my ability to hack a terminal was nearly so rare. And if anypony could do it, who was more likely than a "knight of the Ministry of Technology"? It was just a guess, a suspicion, but it struck me that SteelHooves was covering his bases. Part of me almost admired what he was capable of. Part of me was angry that he was using Homage's broadcast, dedicated to the truth of the wasteland (no matter how bad it hurt), to spread his lies.

I turned off the radio.

* * *

Somepony finally arrived to speak with me. The debonair gentlestallion who took his place on the other side of the desk was a mottled brown unicorn with glasses perched on his nose and a scroll for a cutie mark.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's get down to business, shall we?"

I nodded glumly. I was no longer curious why I was here. I just wanted to get whatever it was over with so I could go.

The unicorn levitated several scrolls onto the desk and opened them.

"Now you should be aware that there are expenses that have to be accounted for. The cost of the rope used to hang Monterey Jack was thirty bottle caps… fine stuff, premium made. Cost for the executioner was twenty-five bottle caps. Then there are cremation expenses…" The stallion looked over his glasses at me. "Unless, of course, you would rather they just throw his body out into the street for the birds." His tone suggested that would be looked on as uncivilized, but that he was required to give me the option. "Cremation itself is one hundred caps, plus an additional fifty-seven for the basic box…"

I stared with dawning comprehension. *I was going to have to pay for Monterey Jack's execution?* I was dumbfounded. How in Equestria did that make in sense?

But, I thought as I sank into depression, it did make sense… it was my fault that he was dead. Why shouldn't I have to pay for it? I listened dispiritedly as the list of fees and expenses and legal charges grew and grew.

"…one year's rent for both the cheese shop and his private quarters. Amounting to seven thousand and two hundred bottle caps. All together, required expenses and fees amount to a total of nine thousand and fourty-seven bottle caps."

I stared vacantly for a moment. Then nodded. With a sigh, I asked, "How long do I have to pay this? I don't have that kind of money." As a group, we had easily more than double that, but I couldn't feel right about draining such a huge amount of bottle caps from what was Calamity and Velvet Remedy's money as well. (SteelHooves' too, although I felt less of a pang about that.)

The gentlestallion just blinked at me.

Perfect. By their standards, I was poor. "I mean, I could probably pay about half of it now…"

Giving me an odd look, the stallion informed me, "It's already been taken out of the accounts. Unfortunately, Monterey Jack didn't have sufficient funds to pay for all of it in caps, so a fair amount of personal property was confiscated for auction in accordance to…" he droned off legalese that went completely over my mane.

Confusion scrambled my thoughts. So I didn't have to pay for Monterey Jack's execution? Then why pull me in here to tell me all this? Did they just assume I wanted to know? So I could gloat? Was I legally required to gloat?

The gentlestallion was staring at me again. A frown broke across his face. "Well, I just lost that bet," he muttered to himself. Then, addressing me, "You have no idea why you're here, do you?"

I shook my head.

"Monterey Jack was convicted of attempted banditry. You were the pony he tried to rob. Therefore, upon his death, all of his properties are legally yours."

What? Wait… *WHAT!?* It was bad enough when I thought I was being punished; I had made peace with that because I deserved no less for my stupidity and failure. Now I was being *rewarded* for it? No! The world did not get to be that fucked up! I refused to let it.

The stallion considered me. "Honestly, there are a number of ponies who suspected that Monterey Jack's confession might have been more from the magic of your horn than the weight of his conscience," he informed me. I remembered the whispering as I passed by. Of course they did. Anypony who knew about this twisted bit of legalese would suspect me. Even I hadn't been able to comprehend why Monterey Jack had confessed until I'd talked with him privately.

The legal stallion continued, "I personally had laid good caps that this was some sort of plot cooked up between you and Monterey Jack." Again he frowned. "Clearly not."

I started at that. "What? He died. What kind of plan would that have been?"

The stallion shrugged. "We all know Monterey Jack hadn't been right since his wife died."

After Clarinet was killed, I'm all they have left.

"Clarinet, right?" I asked, and the legal stallion nodded. "He mentioned his wife. What happened to her?"

"There's a rumor that there is an untouched Stable somewhere in Fetlock. Few months back they were trying to find it. Never did; nobody has…"

My heart sank. It was absurd to feel guilty for having found Stable Twenty-Nine myself, wasn't it?

"…She was killed by a manticore. According to Monterey Jack, he killed the thing, but not before it had stung them both and torn her up right bad. Poor fellow only had enough anti-venom for one and she insisted he use it himself. With her wounds, according to Monterey, she probably wouldn't have made it even if he had given it to her." The stallion shook his head. "Of course, that's just how Monterey's told it. But I've never known the stallion to lie before."

Sweet, merciful Celestia.

The legal stallion cleared his throat and turned back to the documents in front of him. "Returning to the matter at our hooves: even after fees and deductions, you are still left with the private quarters, the deed and business license of the shop, and a modest amount of home furnishings. Of course, there are two matters which must be attended to."

This was so wrong. I couldn't be gaining property from Monterey's tragedy. I just… I couldn't accept this. I didn't deserve this.

"First, of course, is the simple fact that you are not a citizen of Tenpony Tower. And as such, you are not permitted to operate a business within the Tower. Normally, it takes several years to earn citizenship. But with the legal standing of these properties, if you started applications now, you could possibly achieve citizenship within little more than a year." He looked over his glasses, fixing me with a stare. "Still, it is this office's recommendation that you sell off the deed and business rights to the shop to some mare or gentlecolt who is a citizen. Make yourself a tidy little sum and be done with it."

I nodded. I wondered if Homage had any use for an ex-cheese shop?

"Second is the matter of Monterey Jack's children…"

My ears shot up. What was this?

"…who are legally allowed to remain in the private quarters until the end of the month. So while you do legally own the property, I'm afraid you won't be able to kick them out until the first of…"

I felt like I'd been hit by a piano.

By the twisted legal fuckery of Tenpony Tower, *I* was the one bucking Monterey Jack's filly and colts into the deadly wasteland!

I felt I was finally seeing behind the curtain. Monterey Jack's execution made me, the heroine his children worshiped, into the pony stealing their home from them just after their father died. The ultimate buck when they're down. Unless, of course, I did something about it…

…exactly like I had already done. I'd taken care of them even before this trap had snapped shut.

I looked up at the stallion as a new feeling burned away my depression: anger.

* * *

"He played me!"

I screamed at the walls of my suite, telekinetically overturning all of the beds. My eyes were burning with tears. My heart pounded with rage.

"He set me up!" I made the blankets tornado about the room. "I was the goody four-shoes filly he knew he could manipulate. And he was right!" I stomped on all hooves. The blankets soared at the window and rebounded off the glass.

I hated Monterey Jack. I wanted him dead. But he was already dead, and I wasn't somepony who could change her mind and take my frustrations out on his children. He was *so* right about me. So instead, I took my fury out on my room and was thankful that none of my companions were around to see me do it.

It was too much. The shame of my addiction, the pain of how I'd hurt my friends, the betrayal of Velvet Remedy's actions, and now Monterey Jack's four-hooved fucking of me from beyond the grave.

I hurled one of my saddlebags against the wall. If levitation could have any real force behind it, I probably would have punched a hole in the room. As it was, the saddlebag just clanked against the wall, opening and spilling its contents. A lifetime's worth of Party-Time Mint-als rained down on the floor. The stash from Pinkie Pie's safe.

I stared at the pile of tins, frozen in place.

It took only a moment to transfer all my rage and sorrow onto the drugs. Before I knew it, I was in the bathroom, dumping tin after tin into the toilet water, cursing them and myself for everything we had done to my life together.

Flush. There went a months worth. *Flush.* There went dozens more.

I was throwing way countless bottle caps' worth of them… and good riddance. They would never have the chance to hurt anypony else.

Flush. There went what I allowed myself to become dependent upon.

Flush. What I had let come between me and ponies who were closer to me than any family had ever been.

I was crying so hard I could barely see what I was doing. But I didn't need to.

Flush. Flush. Flush.

* * *

The last tin of Party-Time Mint-als floated in front of me, hovering over the toilet, open. I just had to tilt it and flush. Easiest thing in the world. Telekinetic child's play. A tilt and a flush.

The tin hovered there, not tilting.

The last tin.

For all the damage they had done… that I had let them do… Party-Time Mint-als *had* saved my life, and the lives of my friends. More than once.

Should I keep just one tin? Just in case?

But if I took even one more, I could become addicted again. It only took one the first time. And I couldn't do that to myself. I wasn't Monterey Jack. I wasn't willing to screw me over like that.

The tin started to tip.

But what if that mental clarity was the only thing which could save my friends? What if it was Calamity's life on the line? Or Velvet Remedy's? Or SteelHooves? Wouldn't they be worth the sacrifice of myself?

Yes. Yes they would.

The tin leveled and began floating back towards me.

But… could I do that to them? Put them through it all again? And wouldn't it be a betrayal to even keep one tin?

The tin stopped, floating above the lip of the toilet.

"Littlepip?" Homage's voice startled me from the bathroom doorway. My magic imploded, dropping the tin into the toilet, metal case and all.

I looked at her, startled, eyes red and puffy, knowing I looked like a completely ugly mess.

Homage stepped into the bathroom, looking peaceful and elegant in her dress. I cringed back, not wanting to accidentally touch it with my filthy body. She didn't let me get away. She grabbed me, pulling me against her breast. I couldn't contain myself anymore, and broke into open weeping.

I heard the metal tin as Homage levitated it out of the water and dropped it into the pile with all the empty others.

Flush.

◆

At some point, Homage nudged me from my suite up to the Athenaeum where she lived. She played soft music and stayed close to me, leaving DJ Pon3's broadcast on a news-less loop of songs.

"How long before this makes the news cycle," I asked wearily as the sun was beginning to set.

Homage gave me a gentle but reproachful look. "Toaster Repairpony Kicks Addiction – more at the top of the hour?" The pretty grey unicorn gave me a nudge with her nose. "Really? I don't think that's something for the airwaves, do you?"

I smiled gratefully to her.

"Let me cook you something to eat," Homage said before she dared leave my side. I realized how badly I was starving. I hadn't eaten for… the better part of two days?

Homage put to shame the restaurants of Tenpony Tower with their woven fried banana puree and whatnot. Simple, delicious cooking. And she didn't mind cooking more when I finished off everything and was still hungry.

After dinner, I was feeling tired and emotionally drained, not to mention very full, but I now had enough energy to help her clean up.

"Where did you learn to cook like that?" I asked, wishing we had someone with even half her skill traveling with us. I was sorely tempted to suggest she join us (and not just for her food), but I knew she was needed here. All of the Equestrian Wasteland depended on DJ Pon3.

"My delinquent youth," she hinted with a wink. I pressed her with a hoof, and she elaborated. "I really was an assistant to the last DJ Pon3. That's how I took up the mantle when he fell ill; I was the only one who knew him. The magic voice spell has been passed down for at least five DJ Pon3's, so the wasteland never knows there has been a change."

I nodded, having suspected as much.

"I spent several years after getting my cutie mark running around the Manehattan Ruins and beyond with Jokeblue, a close friend…" The friend, I realized, that she had mentioned before. "…The area between here and Fillydelphia wasn't as deadly then as it is now. I hunted for recordings and memory orbs to give to DJ Pon3, in the hopes that they would have new music or useful news for the broadcasts. Did other errands for DJ Pon3. Earned my way into the Tower. Learned how to survive along the way. Cooking, weapon maintenance, a lot of practice hacking computers to get into locked doors and safes."

I thought of all the hacking and lockpicking I had done, driven largely by curiosity and a need to explore and to know. Even if what I learned didn't mean anything. Like keeping the memory was an acknowledgement of and tribute to the past.

"Jokeblue was the one who knew her way around weapons and had the skill to disarm traps…" Homage trailed off as a clearly painful memory hit her.

"Do you… want to talk about it?"

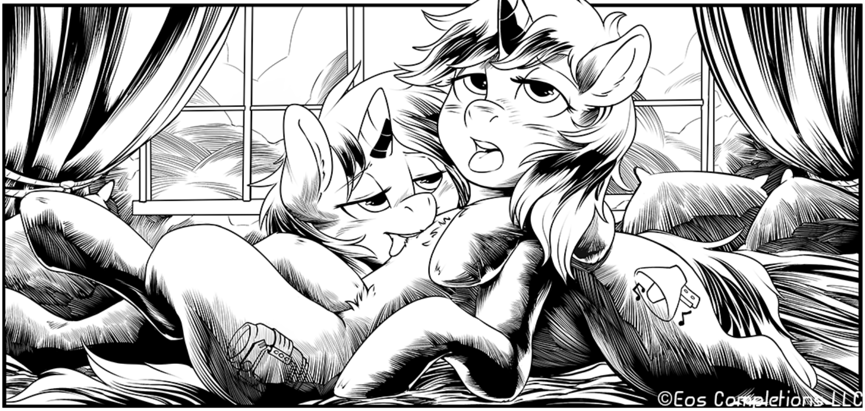
Homage smiled, a tear in her eye. "…most traps. Some cruel bastard rigged up a baby carriage with explosives, used the corpse of a newborn colt and a recording of a baby's crying to lure victims in." I cringed, horrified. "By the time she was close enough to realize the baby was dead, it was too late to run. She tried to disarm it, but…" The dear unicorn's voice broke off, choked.

Now it was my turn to hold Homage.

Skip chapter 20.5

Chapter Twenty and a Half

A Mare Worth Fighting For



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"I'd NEVER felt joy like that before! It just felt so good I wanted to keep smiling forever!"

I stretched out on Homage's bed as she gave me a massage. Either she had learned a lot from our visit to the spa, or she'd had practice. Either way, it was wonderful! If I was a cat, I would have been purring.

I felt her press against me as she leaned close to whisper in my ear. "I know you're under doctor's orders to relax and not exert yourself. You listen about as well as most of his patients."

I nodded, not wanting to really talk about that. Or really about anything. What she was doing with her hooves was divine. She was pressing them in circles against the back of my legs at the base of my rump. Not as skilled as the professional spa ponies, maybe. But unspeakably more delightful because it was Homage doing it.

"So I won't apologize for helping you break them further." I had no idea what she was… oh HELLO! I gasped as I felt her tongue someplace I had only imagined it before. Pleasure burst through my whole body.

And she was just getting started. This was definitely going to qualify as *strenuous activity.*

After the second pass of her tongue, I became vibrant. I was grinning like a fool. *This is really happening. We're really going to do this!*

Then another thought struck me at the third lick. *Oh Goddesses, we're* really *doing this. What if I'm lousy? What if she hates me forever? What if she gets on the radio in the morning and tells all of the Wasteland that the Stable Dweller is the worst lay ever?*

My ecstatic joy replaced with panic, I started shaking all over. When I felt her tongue stop touching, I fought the urge to scream for her to continue, terrified that the spell would break and she'd realize she could be with a much taller and more attractive mare.

"Littlepip, you okay?" her voice was filled with concern. Probably worried that I was suffering some kind of withdrawal symptom or post traumatic stress from one of the many times I had nearly died lately.

"I'm fine," I lied. Just this once.

"Am I… going too fast for you?"

"No!" I cried, my voice straining not to crack. That wasn't a lie. She could have pounced me when I first laid eyes on her and I'd say she was still too slow.

"Good," she said with a laugh. "Because I had *no* intention of stopping."

Then she was back to work. Her tongue was hot as it circled me back there. Do tongues naturally get that hot when near another pony's private parts, or was *I* just hot there and she just providing pressure? I stopped wondering much of anything when it slipped inside.

I cried out. I'm pretty sure I wasn't speaking any known language. Somehow the entire universe had collapsed between my haunches and the only thing left was that hot slippery bit of mare boldly going where no mare had gone before.

Somewhere, a part of me was mortified. Whenever I had been turned on in the past, I had been thinking about or looking at some pony that I didn't have a chance with. My natural instinct had always been to put my back to a wall, but now there was nowhere to hide. She was seeing exactly what I felt, she was *inside* me. It was too much. My hooves were digging at the bed spread, I wanted to run. I knew that any moment she'd realize this was all a huge misunderstanding, she'd throw me out, and I'd have to try to make up some pony so I could finish on my own.

Finish? The pressure was building already. Oh Goddesses, no. Sweet Celestia and Luna. *I've already been blown up recently, have* some *mercy!* It turned out they were busy. I exploded. My body went into spasms and I burst out crying.

"Whoa," Homage pulled her head back licking, well, *me* off her lips. "And here I was worried that I'd gotten rusty. Am I just that good or are you that sensitive?" I could hear the amusement in her voice.

"I'm sorry," I wanted to slink out the room before she started laughing at poor Pip who couldn't last for more than a minute.

I felt her lips on my neck. "Why are you sorry?" her voice was soft. Her mane brushed against me and, I swear, I almost popped again. "It's been a while for me too."

"It's been my whole life." *Oh shit, I did* not *just say that!* I threw both forelegs over my mouth, trying to shove the words back in.

I braced for harsh, mocking laughter. Instead I felt teeth at my ear. "Your first time, and like this?" Was she *moaning?* "I can't say I'm not jealous."

"Well it's not like it's my first, I've had a lot of time alone and–" I had to shove a hoof *in* my mouth this time. *Sweet sky-fucking Celestia, was there anything* else *I could say to embarrass myself?* A very indignant voice shrieked in my head. *Maybe I want to tell her about how I wet the bed as a filly?*

"I meant with another pony." She was sucking on the end of my ear. As it turns out, that feels better than just about anything except what she was doing between my legs with her hooves. "Just one thing. You're not *done,* right?"

Oh Goddesses, was she kidding? Just listening to her voice and that feeling on my ear was enough to… *Oh, here we go again.* Another shock of ecstasy burst through my entire body. She pressed her body against mine and seemed to ride my spasms and bit down on my ear. Hard.

"Well, that answers that," she said after my body had quieted. I felt a telekinetic field wrap around me and flip me on my back. "That's good, because I have *so* much more to do," I had never seen anypony look at me like that before. I blinked and she had disappeared between my legs. Her lips were as able as her tongue, but the hint of teeth made it that much more–

"So I have a question," she said quickly after her lips had brought about the destruction of any thought in my head.

"Now?" I managed to squeak.

Looking up at me, she pressed her chin firmly against my ever dampening crotch. "No time like the present. And I want to know more about you. Understandable, given the situation. Right?"

I was struggling to remember some the more sophisticated words, like "what" when she nipped at my inner thigh. "Ask!"

"That Velvet is *quite* the looker."

You've got to be fucking kidding.

"When you first left the Stable, I'd heard it was to look for her. So is there anything there?" She followed by pressing the tip of her nose into me.

"That's– **AH!** That's– *It's **REALLY** hard to focus when you're doing that!"*

"Do you want me to stop?" Her mouth was right over me, her breath puffing into me. "Do you need to figure out how to answer the question?" She opened her mouth and let that wonderful, amazing tongue dangle, idly tracing my slit.

"It's just, this is a bit of an ambush," I said as quick as I could before having to bite into my wrist to keep from screaming.

She finally sat up, allowing me to relax. Then she brought up the tip of her forehoof. "Let me back up, regardless of what you say, we're *still* doing this." To bring home the point, she pressed harder. "From the way she practically threw me at you and what you've already told me, I know there's at least nothing *actively* going on. But you don't go chasing across half the Wasteland for just anypony."

"I had a major crush on her all my life." No point in trying to play it cool. "But she was just a face, a voice on the radio. Something to fill my fantasies with." I hadn't really put my thoughts in order since she'd shot me, but this all rang true, even if it was all coming out under *duress*. "I really didn't know her until I met her out here in the Wastes."

"Oh?" She laid her head on my belly.

"The fantasy was nothing like the real thing." I sighed, I'd miss those fantasies. They were my oldest companions. "She's… special. But she's *not* the mare I rushed out to rescue. That mare was just pretend, a voice on the radio." Saying that hurt. It was like a goodbye to a part of myself.

She just looked at me for a long time. Then she cocked an eyebrow, "A voice on the radio, huh?"

I groaned. "Oh, don't even start. I thought you were a stallion."

She had gone back to kissing, "Well, you know better now."

"And while we're talking about stallions, Calamity's just a friend too! And I met SteelHooves just before you!" I really didn't want to have to think about either of them between orgasms.

She looked up at me with a pout. "Oh, sweetie, I know you only have eyes for mares. Every account I got about you made mention of you eyeing up some filly or another."

I didn't have long to be embarrassed before her tongue sent another damn wave through me. After crying in tongues I briefly wondered if it counts as one if I come twice in a row.

"I am *loving* playing with you."

I noticed.

"One more question and I'll let you be."

"Fine," I managed to say after remembering my name.

She hopped, pressing her knees into my chest and putting her forehooves under her chin. "So what's a mare like you see in a mare like me?"

She was actually going to let me think about this one, of course.

"If you're getting tired and need something to eat, help yourself." She floated a fruit bowl over to the bedside table.

I realized how ravenously hungry I was, I took an apple from the bowl and devoured it. Licking my lips clean, I looked down at her, patiently waiting on my chest. I rolled my eyes up in mock contemplation for several seconds. "Is 'I was really really horny' a good enough answer?"

She burst out laughing, it was a wonderful sound. "What, none of the pretty raider mares give you a second look?"

"Well, there were more than a few that showed an interest in *penetrating* me, but I was holding out for a gal who'd buy me dinner first." I munched on another apple to drive home my point. "Actually, I always really respected DJ Pon3. Somepony out here dedicated to helping everypony they possibly can? It was a constant reminder that not everypony had become raiders in the Wastes."

Homage kissed my chest and smiled up at me, "I'd think you'd just need to look in the mirror for that."

It turns out, I could still blush. "Yeah, but you were helping everypony without…" I paused, a memory surfacing; I felt blood on my horn and saw a mare on the ground whispering that she didn't want to die. I swallowed a bit of apple in my mouth. "You don't kill anypony. You just help. That meant a lot to me." I saw the understanding on her face. I quickly moved on before she could ask if I wanted to talk about it. I didn't. "Of course, when I found out you were actually a gorgeous mare with a rump that just wouldn't quit, I was head-over-heels. I mean who wouldn't be?"

I felt her slide off my chest, and I took another hearty bite from my third apple. That's when I felt her lips wrap around my clit. It was about a minute before I realized I couldn't breathe and not in the *"ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh"* way but in a "there's a large piece of apple in my windpipe" way. After a few sputters and coughs, she took notice of my peril and, I guess she didn't want to be known as "the mare who killed the Stable Dweller with oral sex" because she sprang into action to help me cough up the lethal snack.

"Warn me before you do that," I hoarsely shouted after the offending chunk of apple fell to the bed.

"I'm sorry," she said giving me a nuzzle on the cheek. "But you called me your hero and then said I had a pretty butt. I couldn't resist." She floated a carrot from the nearby bowl and into her mouth, but rather than eat it, she held it out for me. I reached forward and bit into it, thinking she'd let go, instead she held fast and gave me a flirty look. She waited patiently as I chewed the carrot down until I reached her lips, only then did she swallow what was left in her mouth and I'm pretty sure she only did that to free up her tongue.

After a few minutes of that, I leaned back on the bed and patted my stomach with a contented sigh. "Man, those really hit the spot. So much more flavor than Stable food."

Homage cozied up next to me, pressing her face against my neck. "Do you miss it? The Stables, I mean."

The question caught me by surprise. Not so much because of the question itself, it was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask, but because the answer was, "No."

"Really?" She sounded shocked.

"I mean, I miss not being shot all the time," I added quickly. "And I miss having a comfy place to sleep consistently. But, I never really felt alive in there. It was like we were just waiting to die. I don't think ponies were meant to be cooped up all their lives." She made a noise in understanding and ran a hoof down my side. I kissed the top of her head, smelling her mane. "Also, I've met some really nice ponies since I got out."

"You know," a smile played across my lips as I spoke, "I think that fruit has given me my second wind. You want to continue where you left off?"

She rolled off me and pulled her back legs under her to sit on her haunches. She looked at me like I was foal who made a social faux pas. "Um, Pip, I just watched you have five orgasms, and I don't know what they taught you in the Stables," she leaned back and spread her back legs, "but in the bedroom, you gotta share."

Part of me was embarrassed that I hadn't done anything for her tonight, but that wasn't the part of me that was staring in stunned paralysis at her crotch. Outside of health class, I had never seen another mare like this. It was fascinating. It was exciting. It was giving me another orgasm. *For Goddesses' sake she wasn't even touching me!*

She just watched me shudder and gasp for a minute. "You weren't kidding about the 'being really horny' thing, were you?"

"A few days ago I caught myself ogling a one-eyed griffon," I said after catching my breath.

"Well, at least I know you're open minded," she said with a smirk. She reclined there staring at me, "Hey Pip, are you gonna, you know, *do* something soon?"

Oh. Right. I rolled over to my belly bringing myself at eye level with her lap. I thought about all the things she had done with tongue and lips. I rolled my own tongue around in my mouth. It felt sluggish and clumsy. "Hey, um, do you have a book or something I could read with a few tips or hints or…" She closed her legs. I swear, I'd never been closer to heartbreak.

She took a deep breath and let it out in a quick sigh. "It's alright, next time I'll give you a full tutorial." She got off the bed; I wanted to cry. Then she started rummaging under the bed. "Until then, I just happen to have something we can do that'll work for both of us." She came back into view floating a narrow rectangular box. She popped the lid off. The inside was lined with tissue paper. "It's a bit of pre-war technology I found in my more traveled days. It's a device designed to allow two ponies to share their pleasure."

Her horn lit up, and I saw the tissue being pushed aside. “Don’t worry, it’s been very thoroughly tested for safety.” She floated the object out of the box with a look of pride on her face.

“It’s two dicks stuck together end on end,” I observed flatly.

“Isn’t it though,” she had the same look on her face that I’d seen Calamity wear after cleaning his guns. She finally pulled her eyes from it and looked to me, I had apparently failed to hide my horror. “Don’t worry, it’s not real.” She gave it a poke and it wobbled in the air; I was suddenly nauseous.

“Homage,” I said, staring at the floating phallus. “Remember when I said I like *mares?* That’s… um… really really not a mare.”

“It’s just a *toy* Pip,” she said patiently. She gave me a sideways look. “Do you mean that you’ve never seen anything like this before? Even back in the Stable?” I shook my head. “So what did you do for stress relief?”

“I got to know my hooves pretty well,” I mumbled.

Homage opened her mouth looking like she had more to argue, but then just let it close. She let out a single laugh and said, “Oh well, don’t worry about it.”

I couldn’t help but feel a little rotten. She had looked so happy at the chance to use her toy with another pony, and she’d already done so much for… and *to* me. I reached out a hoof to stop her from putting the box top back on. “Wait, you’re right. I mean, it’s just a toy and… I think I can be okay with it if it’s you.” I realized as I said it, that I meant it. We hadn’t known each other long, but she already meant a lot to me and I was willing to try and make her happy.

She smiled warmly and kissed me on the nose. “I *so* have you wrapped around my hoof.” She giggled and started rummaging in the bedside table drawer. “I think this a new record for me when it comes to relationships. You can basically orgasm on command and damn if you don’t make the best faces when you do. Now I just need to teach you how to return the favor and you’ll be perfect.”

I knew from that instant that she would forever wear the dress here. I had officially become the passive one in the relationship, and I really wasn’t sure I was… Wait, *relationship?* This was a relationship. *I,* Littlepip, short for Pipsqueak, had an honest to Goddesses relationship. I was grinning like it was my birthday and Homage had just popped out of the cake. I had a relationship. She could shove whatever she wanted in me because *I had a relationship!*

After I came back down off my cloud, I noticed she was looking at me intensely and had in fact been talking the whole time. “I *said* I’m going to need to use this,” she floated a tube in front of me. “It’ll be cold, but since you’ve never used anything like this before, this is *going* to hurt some.”

Psh. I’ve been shot, stabbed, smacked around, and nearly cooked by a dragon. I was ready for anything. I rolled over to my belly and raised my hips. I looked back and gave her a wink. She just shook her head and applied an extra coat of some kind of jelly on one of the… ends.

She got behind me and put her hooves on both sides of my haunches and adjusted my stance. She assumed an identical stance and her “toy” floated between us.

“You ready?” she called out.

I grinned smugly and called out, “You bet your hot ass I am.” Then it touched me.

"EEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee, that's *really* cold!" I shrieked, my voice far too high. "Oh." It was pushing against me; I clenched and it stopped.

"Pip, if you don't want to do this," Homage began.

"No, no, I said I'd try this with you," I said quickly, trying not to shudder at the feel of the slimy, cold, and rubbery thing pressing between my legs.

"Then you're going to have to *relax.* Trust me."

Okay, I trusted her. I relaxed. I let out a loud breath. She pushed it in. This was the second time I had invented a new language that night. She pushed it slowly, in between what could be generously described as a hurricane of profanity, I choked on how much it hurt and how *good* it felt. This thing had been designed to touch every sensitive spot at once and whoever designed it was really damn good at their job. It came to a rest deep inside and I felt the orgasm rip through me as it rotated. I looked back and saw that Homage had twisted on to her back with it already well inside her. *And there was another two-in-one. Should I be counting these?*

"What the fu–," I panted. "What are you doing?"

She squirmed, sending another lightning bolt through me. "I *really* want to watch you; it's easier like this," she moaned. "Now hold still, I'm about to turn it on."

"What do you mean turn it o–" There was clicking sound. "OoOoOoOoOoH sweet Celestia horn fucking Luna in the ass!" *It vibrates; how novel.*

I fleshed out my two new languages with a shiny series of swears, all having to do with the female organs. I think sometime less than a thousand years passed, but I really wasn't the best to judge since I was dead for at least part of the time. The only thing I can say for sure was that we were going to need to change the sheets and pillowcases and that she made the silliest and most gorgeous face when she came. She looked like she was sneezing, laughing, and had a pinched nerve in her neck all the same time. Needless to say, I came with her.

She turned it off, and I would have collapsed if it wasn't still holding us together. She carefully slid it out of me and then herself. She gave it an affectionate kiss, on my end I noted with some small perverted pride, and then set it back in its box. She stuck her tongue out at me and asked, "So what did you think of my toy?"

I tentatively touched my aching nethers. "It does its job," I grunted.

She nodded and gave a whistle, "I noticed."

I rolled onto my back, trying to move my legs as little as possible. "But to be perfectly honest, I liked it more when it was just you and me. That felt more like I was just masturbating while you watched. It was just… too artificial."

She put the lid back on the box and slid it under the bed. "Fair enough," she sighed. "Thank you for letting me *really* try it out, and I promise I won't bring it out on you again." She crawled over and kissed me on the cheek. "Except on my birthday."

I sighed and floated a peach from the bowl and munched on it quietly for a few minutes. Eating helped calm me down and brought me back from exhaustion. A thought hit me as I recovered.

"So, time for *your* interview Ms. Pon3," I said, trying to sound cool with arguable success.

"Turnabout is fair play," she said rubbing her face against my neck.

"So what's a well respected DJ's assistant doing with a toaster repair gal like me?" I asked, half laughing at her joke.

She didn't laugh. She sat up and turned to face me. All expression had fled from her face. "Do you really want to know?"

"Well, yeah, I asked didn't I." I was getting nervous; maybe I *didn't* want to know if this was the effect asking had.

"It's because you're a hero." She said it without any trace of mockery.

I'd have blushed if my face wasn't still flush from our multi-orgasmic good time. "Not this agai–"

"Let me finish," she snapped. "You asked and now you have to listen to the answer, no matter how bad it hurts."

I was getting scared.

"I've seen all kinds of things as DJ Pon3 and even before that when I was out in the Wastes. I'd seen horrors, as I'm sure you've seen."

I only nodded, thinking of skinned and splayed open corpses used as decoration and the image of Calamity shooting that young foal raider from the other day popped in my head.

"But I've seen and heard about heroes too." She sounded wistful as she continued. "Ponies who set out to help others and fight against anything that threatened their fellow pony. I loved them. I lived to see and hear about them. They gave me just a little hope that maybe we weren't damned after all. That there might be a light at the end of this fucking tunnel we buried ourselves in."

I was about to speak my agreement when she went on.

"And then I'd see their heads on spikes outside a raider camp." She looked at me hard. "You're a hero Littlepip, and that means you're going to die very soon because you're a blight on the Wasteland. They'll kill you because 'what's right' doesn't fit in this world any more, and *I'm* going to have to report it after."

I got up and backed out of bed. I had thought about dying before, knew it was something that could happen so easily to me out here. But to be told it was a fucking certainty…

She wasn't done. "Or you'll give up. I've seen that too. Heroes who helped folks only for them to be slaughtered by some other threat or worse, for those they saved to go to do atrocities themselves in the name of survival. They just hang up their guns and go find some shit-hole to drink themselves to death in."

I fell back on my haunches.

"You're a good pony, Littlepip. An honest to fucking goodness hero. And I wanted to know you, to hold you, to love you before you're gone too."

Something broke inside me. No. Not something. My heart. My heart broke. I'd searched and fought and killed and nearly died in the name of what I believed to be "right". I'd found somepony who did the same, and she just told me that none of it would actually matter in the end.

I saw the Wasteland, not as a place, but as a giant razor clawed beast devouring ponies by the dozens. I saw myself attack it valiantly only to be smashed without it even looking. I saw a line of "me"s, each one attacking and dying without ever even slowing the monster's grizzly feast.

I saw New Appleoosa burning, the townsponies all dead or being lead away in chains along with all the slaves I had fought so hard to free. I saw the Talon mercs laughing as they threw Monterey Jack's foals down from the sky. I saw Gawd with her small army attacking a convoy for supplies and leaving no survivors.

I saw myself coming upon Silver Bell, so broken that she didn't even have herself left anymore, in front of the graves of her family. She ran up to me and pressed against my chest, crying and asking me to tell her it would be okay. I saw myself bring out Little Macintosh and press it against her head. I said it would be okay, and then I pulled the trigger.

I wanted to scream, but I knew I'd just throw up if I opened my mouth. I fell, my forelegs unable to hold me up anymore.

I needed something. Anything to believe in. I tried to think of Celestia and Luna, but they were just shadows in my mind now.

I thought of Silver Bell again, but I thought of what had really happened. I saw Velvet bring her to Ditzy Doo. Ditzy Doo. My mind locked on to her.

I tried to imagine Ditzy before the war. I couldn't keep a straight idea of what color her coat was, but I knew from the errant strands still clinging to her that her mane was straw colored. In my mind she was beautiful back then; she had to be. She was flying by, and everypony smiled up at her. With a vague imaginary voice that sounded like a fading echo, she apologized for not having any deliveries for them today.

Ditzy turned and looked out at Cloudsdale in the distance. It exploded. I saw the fire overtake her, and I saw her burning, and she leapt out to try to protect the nearest pony, but they were gone. I saw her fall to the ground as what she was now, a ghoul. I saw her wake up in the newly formed Wasteland. She walked, just looking in shock at the carcass of her world.

Then she'd have heard a noise. A foal crying. She'd have run to it. The foal would be too hurt to walk, but would have screamed and tried to run when it saw her. Ditzy smiled reassuringly, only making them scream worse. Then she'd have rolled her eyes independently of each other and the foal would have stopped crying, in confusion if nothing else. Ditzy would have thrown the foal on her back, picked a direction, and would have walked.

On the way, more crying, more screaming, all of them foals. She stopped to gather every single one. She finally came to a collection of huts. The ponies there shot Ditzy on sight. The foals gathered around her and screamed that she helped them, that she was a good pony. The ponies mended her wounds and took the foals in. Ditzy hears screams off in the distance and she leaves.

I see her much later. A slaver's hoof is on her neck, across the room another slaver is looming over a filly. Ditzy screams, "Don't hurt her, she's just a foal. Please, I'll do anything, just don't hurt her! You don't *want* to do this!"

The slaver by the filly yells at the one on Ditzy's neck, "Shut that zombie bitch up! She's killing my hard-on."

The slaver on Ditzy's neck, a unicorn, takes up a knife from a nearby table. "Oh, I'll shut her up."

I see Ditzy on the floor, gore pooling around her mouth. The two slavers on the other side of the room, laughing, their backs to her. She pulls herself up, two of her legs are broken. She picks up a piece of piping in her mouth.

I see her taking the filly she rescued to New Appleoosa. She's helping Ditzy to write. I see Ditzy pouring over a large blank book, she titles it "The Wasteland Survival Guide."

I see Ditzy making a delivery that takes her past Ponyville, she hears the screams of a filly.

I see her now, as I saw her then, a lifetime ago. She's beaten, she's caged, she's sure she'll die as soon her captors decide how. She's wrapped around a foal, trying to help them stop crying. I free her, I thought she was a monster. I see her again, unarmed, about to be killed because there was another filly in pain.

I'm back in the present, and I can't stop crying. I'm sobbing so hard my entire body hurts. Homage touches my back, and I stand up instantly. I suck back enough snot so that I can talk, and I choke out as loud as I can, "You're wrong."

I'm still shaking, but I refuse to stop. "I've seen some fucking horrors too! I've seen things so ugly that it made me wonder if that fucking war only gave us half of what we deserved for having such shit inside us. But that's wrong!" I wipe my eyes so I can see. "I've seen goodness too; I've seen a town that dealt with slavers for their livelihood give their lives to save the ponies they partially helped enslave. I've seen a band of raiders turn a prison into the beginnings of a trading post, a whole new town." My throat tightened, but I couldn't stop now. "I've seen a pony who watched her entire fucking world die; she's suffered *every fucking thing* either of us can imagine, and the only thing she cares about is helping."

I stamped the ground. "I will not listen as you or anypony tells me that goodness is a blight. GOODNESS IS NOT A FUCKING BLIGHT!" I screamed as loud as my throat would allow. "I've seen things, and I know *in my heart* that we're not beyond hope. We can be good. We *want* to be good! It's just that in a world so badly broken, darkness has been allowed to run free for so long that they've convinced everypony that that's the way it is now. Ponies just need to be shown that they don't have to be scared all the time, and they'll fight against the darkness again, and one day foals will *laugh* at the idea that there were once monsters in the shadows."

I stood my ground and looked at Homage; she was frozen. "You say that they'll either kill me or I'll give up. Well they're going to have to fucking kill me, because their world is a *lie* and I will *not* give up. Ever!" I breathed heavily and the tears dried up in me. Homage just stared at me as though she'd never seen me before.

I didn't know what I expected her to do, but I certainly didn't expect her to kiss me and lead me back to the bed. "I believe you," was all she said.

I blinked my burning eyes. "Come again?"

"I intend to as soon as you get over here," she said with a half smile. I just looked at her. "I believe you. I was wrong. I thought I'd seen heroes before. I thought I'd seen *everything* before." Tears streamed down her face, she ignored them. "But I'd never seen *you* before. I believe you, Littlepip. I believe *in* you. Things *can* change, and when they do, it'll be because you reminded us all that darkness is just a passing thing and that our true nature is *good.*"

I guess I wasn't out of tears after all.

"Now get your adorable ass over here. I'm going to give you that tutorial I promised."

I climbed back into bed with her. With her mouth on me and mine on her, she taught me. She went slowly so that I didn't get too excited. After some rigorous testing, I turned out to be, well, passable anyway.

Homage lay sleeping beside me. I knew I should have joined her long ago, but I just laid there and ate the last apple from the bowl as I watched her sleep.

I felt something I'd only heard about in rumors and stories burning in my chest. Love, they always called it. I loved her. She had shown me that even a pony who thought they had seen it all could still have hope. And when there was love and hope, evil would never stand a chance. I made a mental note to give Ditzy a big squishy hug sometime for reminding me of that.

I laughed at my own cheesy thoughts. "Goddesses, I am *so* gay."

Bonus Perk: Way of the Fruit – You understand the way of the fruit. You enjoy strange and wonderful benefits whenever you eat… fruit. When you do it, you get a temporary +1 bonus to your strength. Being eaten ain't so bad either.

Behind the Curtain

I sat up, startled, my gaze drawn to the dark window.

Beside me, Homage stirred in the bed, opening an eye as she magically shifted the covers. "Littlepip?" she questioned sleepily.

I told her I thought I'd seen a flash of green outside the window. It reminded me of the flash I'd noticed in the fog nearly a week ago.

"Probably just a balefire phoenix," Homage dismissed, nuzzling close. "There are several of them in Manehattan."

"Yeah," I nodded. "But I think this one has been following us."

⁂

We spent the next morning together. Homage left the bed long enough to cook us breakfast. And then again a couple hours later to poke around in the Emergency Broadcast Station above us. The news this time included a retelling of my "brave and daring rescue" of Blackwing's Talons, including congratulations from DJ Pon3 on once again stomping two eggs under one hoof – apparently *I* had taken out three alicorns single-hoofedly by blowing up a raider compound. I buried my head under the sheets. It shouldn't have surprised me. (In fact, I would have been surprised if Calamity hadn't given her express permission to lay that at my hooves.) Homage had proven she really did enjoy making me squirm. Every way she could.

She was gone for the better part of an hour, leaving me to my thoughts. When she returned, I had reluctantly decided to broach an uncomfortable topic. The Black Opal.

"That thing?" she asked, immediately knowing what I was talking about. I expected her to ask why I wanted it, but instead, "How did you know I had one of those?"

I bit my lip. "A… and acquaintance wants me to 'procure it'." I looked away, then back into her eyes. "I was very tempted to tell the pony to just fuck off. But I figured I would ask. Please, feel free to say no. I don't want anything to come between us right now. Or, really, ever."

Homage regarded me for a painful moment, then smirked. "Dear, the only thing coming between us for the last several hours has been sweat. But even I had to attend to business, as much as I wanted to slack off. I'm not going to begrudge you doing the same."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"And yes, you can have it." She caught my eyes with an earnest gaze. "I have a gift for you too. But the Black Opal… think of it as a down payment. I have a quest I want to hire you for."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Anything."

She laughed. "You might not say that after I tell you what it is. But… you and your friends, you are planning to head towards Fillydelphia aren't you?" The laughter in her voice died as she spoke that name.

I nodded firmly. "I'm still convinced that something is escalating in the Equestrian Wasteland. Something involving Red Eye and the alicorns. I know they've been around for quite a while," I told her. Long enough for SteelHooves to become known to the monsters as the Mighty Alicorn Hunter, sarcastically at least. Questioning my theory, "The alicorns have been around a long time, right? But, I'm guessing, they've gotten a lot more common?"

Homage considered that. "Hadn't even heard of them ten years ago. Now they're all over the place in Canterlot, and this last year I've noticed groups of them showing up in Manehattan too."

I nodded again. "When I uncover what's going on, DJ Pon3 will be the first to know," I promised.

"And all of Equestria will know soon after," Homage swore. "Although I might get a foreleg up on you…" I suspected the innuendo was intentional. "…if you complete this not-so-little task for me. You remember that bank of blank screens in the E.B.S.?"

I had taken note of them when she first allowed me inside the M.A.S.E.B.S. and let me look around. I told her so.

"Those are the feeds from the Fillydelphia tower. Red Eye has taken control of that tower, or at least the three percent of the tower that I normally have access to, and locked me out of it. If you are going that way, I want you to attach an override to the maneframe in the tower's station. That will allow DJ Pon3 to finally have eyes in that horrible place. Red Eye has operated long enough in the shadows."

I put a hoof down (although stomping a pillow didn't have nearly the effect). "Agreed."

* * *

Homage pulled down the picture of Splendid Valley, revealing a wall safe with a door made of thickly armored glass. It opened for her magic with a click.

There were three items inside, two of which she floated out, giving to me. The first was the Black Opal. I gazed at the item full of memories that Watcher wanted so badly.

"I want to give this to you as a gift," Homage said with a soft smile and a warm but insistent voice as she floated out the brightly pink statuette of a very familiar pony. I had never seen Pinkie Pie look so young and so alive. I half-expected the statuette to jump up, animated by the sheer energy in her expression, and start bouncing around the room. This, I realized, was the real Pinkie Pie… *Twilight's* Pinkie Pie. In comparison, the mare I had seen in the memory seemed like a shadow.

"It was a gift given to me from the previous DJ Pon3, who got it from the one before him. I'm told it was given to the original DJ Pon3, Vinyl Scratch, by the Mare of the Ministry of Morale herself." The figurine gave off such an aura of unbridled happiness that I couldn't imagine anypony's morale sagging around her. "It has served me well. And now, I want to give it to you."

I looked at Homage, feeling a startled reluctance. I couldn't! This was an heirloom! It was…

"I know what you've been through. And I know that she went through it too. You…

you beat it. She didn't. I want you to have this as a reminder; as something to look at any time you feel the urge to bite down on another Mint-al."

I swallowed hard. And nodded solemnly, understanding the gravity of this gift. I reached out with my magic, wrapping the little Pinkie Pie in a telekinetic sheath, and immediately felt a jolt. Everything became clearer. My body became more alive. It was more than a little like biting into a Mint-al, but it tasted like candy apples and cupcake frosting. ("What did?" part of my mind insisted. It wasn't like I had just put anything in my mouth.) Between the Twilight Statuette and Pinkie Pie, I felt almost like I was on Mint-Als without them. Only cleaner. Better. More… wholesome.

I turned the statuette around to read the base. It didn't match the others. Of course it wouldn't match the others.

"Awareness! It was under 'E'!"

I felt joyous and heartbroken at the same time. The statuette was a reminder, both of what I had done wrong and of the cost had I not been pulled from the abyss by my friends. A sorrowful acknowledgement of the damage I had done and now I needed to repair. And a messenger telling me that I had the strength to not do it again. And, perhaps most of all, a keepsake from Homage letting me know she understood my weakness with acceptance and forgiveness. "Thank you, Homage. This means… more to me than you can know."

I floated it into my saddlebag (which Homage had apparently floated up here with us while I was too emotionally out of it to notice). Opening the flap to the pouch which held three other statuettes, I took a piece of cloth and tied Pinkie Pie next to Twilight. Now, they could be together again. It was silly, but it just felt right.

* * *

As Homage closed the safe, I took notice of the last item mounted inside the safe. It was some sort of magical energy pistol, but not of any make I had ever seen, and with a grip that wouldn't fit in any pony's mouth.

Curiosity sparked, I asked Homage about it.

"Long story," she told me. "One night, Jokeblue and I were poking our hooves around Fetlock, trying to find a Stable we'd heard rumors about, when there was a strange explosion that lit up the clouds above. At first, we thought it was thunder, but then all sorts of debris started raining out of the sky. Chunks of the strangest sky-wagon you ever laid eyes on. We took cover in a burned-out passenger wagon. When it was over, I found that thing amongst the rubble." Homage chuckled. "Okay, maybe not that long a story."

"What is it?"

"Nastiest magical gun the Equestrian Wasteland has ever seen to my knowledge. One shot from that thing will turn whatever you hit into vapor. And not like the magical energy weapons you've seen, which do that only once in a blue moon. Every. Single. Time." Homage actually sounded scared of the gun. "I believe you could kill a dragon with one shot from that thing." And with those words, so did I.

"Where did it come from?" I wondered aloud. The idea that there were ponies… the pegasi maybe… with weapons that devastating chilled me tail to forehooves.

"Jokeblue figured it was from some sort of flying tank that the pegasi were experimenting with that blew up on them. Me…" Homage swallowed. "I know I'm being foalish, but I can't help but think it fell from a lot higher than that."

"Higher?" I had the strange mental image of items falling to Equestria from the moon, emptying from Nightmare Moon's toy chest.

Homage looked a bit embarrassed, "You'll laugh."

I promised I wouldn't. And resolved not to, no matter how hard it was.

The beautifully sexy grey unicorn took a moment to gather her thoughts. Then, starting cautiously, "I once met a zebra."

That wasn't what I expected her to say at all. My ears shot up. I leaned forward.

"They… don't have the same relationship to the sky that we do. Obviously, since they have no pegasi. But it's more than that. Before the apocalypse, we ponies had always looked to the sky with a sense of joy and safety. We saw the sun, guided through the sky by Celestia during the day. And the moon, Luna's charge, keeping an eye on us during the night. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna were our benevolent rulers. And even though most ponies never met them personally, the sun and the moon were symbols of their kind presence everywhere and to everypony in Equestria."

I felt my body leaning closer, wanting to catch every word of this. I'd never heard Celestia and Luna spoken of this way.

"When they perished in the apocalypse, and the pegasi closed off the sky, stealing the sun and the moon from us, we turned them into deities to keep them always with us. Even those trapped underground in the Stables seemed to do so. A sort of parallel evolution."

What she was saying was almost blasphemous, but I bucked away the desire to admonish her, leaning precariously closer to hear. Homage had a perspective that I wanted to hear, even if I probably would not have listened to it from anypony else. She made me wonder, ask questions. For instance, would this explain why Calamity did not believe in the Goddesses? Was atheism a pegasus trait? Unlike us, they had never lost the embrace of the sun and the moon.

"The zebras, though, they cringe from the sky," Homage said. The statement was something I would have expected from a propaganda poster, not a pony who had learned this directly from a zebra. But I knew Homage, and it would not be like her to not speak objective truth as she knew it. "The zebras look up and see the stars staring down at us from a great black emptiness. And the stars, they know, are not benevolent."

I leaned further, tipped over and fell on my face.

Homage stopped, covering a chuckle with her hoof. When I'd gotten back up, probably looking as sheepish as I felt, she continued. "There is intelligence up there, the zebras believe, from the stars themselves. The stars burn with cold, malicious fire. No number of them could warm the sky at night. They wish ill on our world. And sometimes they will act, not against us directly, but to enable us to harm and ruin ourselves."

I opened my muzzle, the suggestion that the zebras were a bit batty dying on my lips. Yes, it sounded insane. But didn't we have legends that suggested the same? I recalled the story of *The Mare on the Moon.* (The real version, not that "Stallion on the Moon" nonsense.)

The stars will aid in her escape.

"In particular, they tell of four malevolent stars with hearts of cruelty and chaos which yearn to taste our pain and destruction, wrought by our own hooves." With a grimace, Homage added, "If there's any truth to the zebra mythology, I'd guess we've given them quite the banquet."

Four stars helping destroy Equestria. Now why did *that* sound familiar.

Homage shrugged off the eerie atmosphere that had settled in the room by her tale. "Anyway, like I said. Foalish. Jokeblue was probably right. Some pegasus experiment that blew up in their faces."

* * *

Cautiously, Homage at my side, I lowered my horn towards the black opal. If I was going to give this to Watcher, I wanted to know what was on it first.

It was only reluctantly that I touched the opal with my magic and let it take Homage and her Athenaeum away from me…

* * *

I felt strangely wrong.

We were in a darkened hallway, wide and elaborately decorated, walking towards a brightly lit room with a decorative, curtained partition hiding half of it. There were four ponies walking in front of me, a fifth leading them. The Mares of the Ministries.

The first pony I recognized was Pinkie Pie. While every other pony was walking sedately through the hall, she was bouncing like a fanfilly on her way to her idol's next performance. The pony was a little younger than I'd seen her before. The candy-cane look was still going strong though.

I felt a pang of deep embarrassment as my gaze fell on the lead pony, the beautiful white unicorn I had… fantasized about. And the pony I was riding just wouldn't stop staring…

Celestia's solar-flaring mareheat!

The creature I was riding *wasn't a pony.* He (and he was most definitely and unbearably a *he!)* was as big as a stallion! I felt… things that were not hooves at the ends of my legs. And wings folded to my back. And a tail!…

"Spike," Fluttershy asked timidly, turning around and looking at me. "Doesn't that hurt?"

My attention was drawn to something tight and metal squeezing my head. The recollector, I assumed. It did not seem to be designed for… whatever I was.

I opened my mouth (which felt all wrong) and answered, "Naw. Barely feel a thing. Besides, Rarity wanted a memory of this."

"She could have worn it herself," Twilight Sparkle muttered under her breath from directly in front of me. I saw my eyes go once again to the white unicorn with the perfect purple mane. She didn't seem to hear it, being engaged in conversation with the pony I knew to be Applejack. The orange pony with the three-apple cutie mark looked a little younger and not as weary as she had at Pinkie Pie's last party.

"Ah sure hope this ain't nothin' t' do with… *that…* thing we never talked about," Applejack was saying with nervous caution.

"Oh no, darling. I gave that project up ages ago," Rarity replied with graceful dictation.

"Oh," the orange pony sighed with clear relief. "Good."

As we approached, we walked across a fancy carpet woven with gemstones. I felt a cold shock as the creature I was riding stepped over it. Twilight Sparkle had stopped just ahead and turned to eye the carpet, as Rarity and Applejack talked. But her attention was drawn by Rarity loudly clearing her throat.

Fluidly, Rarity shifted the subject, speaking up to address all four of the ponies she was leading. "Now this really is just a first design. But I think you'll all be impressed."

"Always thrilled to see one of your designs, Rarity," Twilight Sparkle encouraged.

Rarity smiled with businesslike thankfulness. "And this is just the light suit, not the fully powered version." She turned to Applejack and smiled demurely, "And I do want to make it clear that I'm not trying to step on your hooves here. This armor isn't as strong as your Steel Ranger suits, and doesn't offer quite the protection…"

"Then what's the point?" Applejack interrupted. "Ah don't see the use in creatin' armor that is *less* protective!"

The group had reached the ending of the hallway. There was a large mirror to one side of the room, and the other was filled with sewing machines, bolts of cloth and dress ponies. Designs and schematics covered the walls. At Rarity's motion, they stopped, each turning her attention towards the partition. (Except for my alien ride, who only had eyes for the white unicorn.)

"Well, because there is more to an outfit than just how well it stops bullets, of course!"

Applejack looked ready to disagree strongly, but bit back her comment.

"Okay, Rainbow Dash!" Rarity called out. "They're ready for you!"

Around the curtained partition stepped the shadow out of a nightmare. A blue pegasus pony who was encased in a black, insectoid carapace, with only the front of her muzzle and the undersides of her wings showing. Her tail was hidden within a scorpion-like sheath with a vicious, barbed stinger. The ebony suit of armor was sleek and wicked. Yellow-orange protective goggles with a bug-like compound eye-pattern completed the look. Built into the sides of the suit were antenna-like protrusions; the crystals that tipped those magical-energy weapons shimmered with shifting rainbow light.

The reactions of the other ponies were immediate.

"EEEEE!"

"Whoa nelly!"

"That looks… demonic."

"Oooooh. Dashie, you look *scary!*"

The creature I was riding turned to watch Rarity suddenly take off. "Fluttershy! Come back! It's only Rainbow Dash!"

I (we?) turned back in time to see Rainbow Dash push up the goggles with one armored hoof. Her eyes narrowed, a smirk running across her muzzle as she lowered her body into a menacing battle stance in front of the mirror. She growled menacingly, the armor making her look positively sinister.

"Oh yeah!" she said. "*This* is cool!"

Reality reasserted itself, leaving me feeling very strange. It was good to be back in my own hooves. I didn't ever want to be that… thing again.

* * *

SteelHooves approached me as I trotted across Tenpony Tower's monorail station. "You're headed to meet that… sprite-bot friend of yours, right?"

I nodded, eyeing the armor-concealed warrior.

"Watcher," he said, surprising me.

"You know Watcher?" I blurted out. Then mentally bucked myself in the head. I had to remember to start actually asking SteelHooves questions.

"I know of Watcher," SteelHooves intoned. "You don't live as long as we have without crossing each other's wake."

It took me a moment to parse what he had said, but then I nodded. "So… Watcher really has been around that long. Who is Watcher… and what is she, or he… or it… doing?"

"Who? That I couldn't tell you." SteelHooves lifted a foreleg, looking to it. "Watcher lets ponies know less about Watcher than I let them know about me. Not without good reason." He put his hoof down. "As for what: Watcher has a habit of finding ponies with a… who are…"

I wasn't aware I was staring at him until SteelHooves returned the stare. "Watcher finds ponies who are *better ponies.* And sets them on a path to find others, to create teams of friends."

I found myself feeling nervous. I didn't like looking at my adventures from the outside like that. "And then?"

"Well, most of the time, they disappear. Or end up dead."

That. Was not. Comforting.

SteelHooves stayed behind at the station as I trotted out alone on the Celestia Line. I didn't have far to go. The monorail curved around a ruined building, Tenpony Tower disappearing from sight. And there was Watcher, the sprite-bot floating silently. Waiting.

"I have it," I said flatly.

"Thank you, Littlepip. I knew I could trust you. Now, this sprite-bot has a compartment for spare batteries. If you could just…"

"No."

The sprite-bot floated silently for a moment. "Huh?" Watcher sounded perplexed.

"Trust goes two ways, right?" I challenged.

"Well… yes. I relayed your message, just like you asked. Before you got the Black Opal."

I nodded. Made sense, but not what I was after. Not now. I felt a fierce determination set in. "Answer's still no."

"No? You got it, but you're not going to give it to me?"

"Oh, I'm going to give it to you," I said forcibly. "In person."

Watcher fell silent again. This time, I didn't wait for a response. "You talk a lot about virtues and friendship. Well, friends don't run away every time a conversation turns personal. You can't have friends if you hide behind robots and never let anypony see the real you." I snorted. "Hell, even SteelHooves does better than you do. You want this? I want to meet you."

"Why?"

"Because I want to know if you're actually my friend or if you're just playing me too."

Watcher bobbed silently a moment longer. I wondered just how much the stranger behind the curtain wanted this black opal with the interesting but seemingly insignificant memory. Then, just as I was convinced that Watcher would tell me to go take a jump off the monorail, the toneless mechanical voice said, "Fine."

I blinked. It was the response I wanted. But…

"You're right, Littlepip." I heard a beep from my foreleg. "I've uploaded my location into your PipBuck. I'll see you soon." There was a burst of static and the sprite-bot floated away on a drum solo.

I lifted my leg to look at my PipBuck. There was an icon on my Equestrian map. Far, far away from Manehattan. In the middle of nowhere. It would take weeks to travel there on hoof.

But if Watcher thought this would dissuade me, or even delay me, then Watcher was wrong.

* * *

I had spent one more night in Tenpony Tower with Homage. After which, sadly, it was time to leave. Our first stop was Fetlock.

Calamity spent several hours underneath the Sky Bandit installing the flux regulator and making sure everything was in working order. By the time he was done, it was getting rapidly dark. "Ah got great news, ponies," he said as he crawled out, looking greasy. "We all got ourselves transportation!"

Velvet Remedy, SteelHooves and I stomped in thunderous applause.

"Now this beauty is powered offa an array of spark batteries, an the last two centuries ain't been kind. So we'll have t' swap 'em out pretty regular t' keep 'er running."

"Wait!" Velvet Remedy said with alarm. "Do you mean this deathtrap's ability to say afloat behind you could cut out at any moment?"

Calamity looked at her almost sympathetically. "Naw. She'll start t' sag first. Become hard t' steer. We'll have plenty o' warnin'."

"And," I assured Velvet Remedy, "if that happens, I think my telekinesis is strong enough by now to keep us going long enough to land safely." There was no way I could lift that much for a prolonged period, not enough to travel anywhere at least; but I was completely confident that I could keep us aloft even if the spark batteries died *and* Calamity fell asleep. For a few minutes.

The others began to gather inside the Sky Bandit. Already, Velvet Remedy was cleaning it with her magic and discussing how to decorate it. Neither of the boys seemed inclined to participate.

I floated out a spoon and can of sweet potatoes, opening it. I was hungry again, and I intended to eat lunch as I planned the next three moves. With the *Sky Bandit,* we could be on Watcher's doorstep in less than two days.

"uh, Littlepip?" Calamity called out. "Are ya gonna hang out there in the rain?"

I paused, a spoon of sweet potatoes lifted halfway to my mouth. "What? It's not…"

>>BOOOM!!<<

Thunder cracked directly overhead and water came down as if somepony had turned on a giant faucet directly above me. I was soaked in an instant, my hair sagging over my face. The can filled with water, floating chunks of sweet potato out onto the ground.

Leave it to a pegasus pony to know.

Tossing aside the can (now full of mostly water), I galloped into the shelter of the passenger wagon. Calamity and Velvet Remedy took shelter behind SteelHooves as I shook hard, flinging water everywhere.

There was a beautiful, piercing cry. And the balefire phoenix swooped in out of the rain through a shattered window. It landed on the seat next to Velvet Remedy whose eyes went wide. She let out a squeal of delight.

* * *

"You've named her Pyrelight?" SteelHooves asked, echoing my own thoughts as Velvet Remedy fed the bird before curling up under her blanket. We'd been traveling through the air for a day now, ever since the cloudburst had ended. The balefire phoenix had remained with us, or more precisely with Velvet Remedy.

I personally found the name a little morbid. It made me wonder about my friend.

We took turns sleeping and watching, passing around my binoculars. So far, nothing had shot at us. By now, we had a good idea where we were headed. It was hard to miss the giant mountain jutting up over Equestria like one of those spire towers.

Once SteelHooves was certain Velvet Remedy was deep asleep, he stepped over to me and whispered in my ear, "You should persuade her to spend less time in that memory orb."

I looked at Velvet Remedy. In the last sixteen hours, she'd disappeared into the Fluttershy memory twice. It was like she had an addiction of her own.

"That's not a good memory," SteelHooves rumbled, surprising me. I looked to him, wondering how a non-unicorn could know what the memory was. As if reading my thoughts, he answered bemusedly, "I asked her."

Oh. I felt like facehoofing. "What's wrong with that memory?"

"Fluttershy wasn't like the others. Rainbow Dash wanted to ***win*** the war. Applejack just wanted to protect other ponies. Especially after Big Macintosh died. Twilight Sparkle wanted to please the Princesses, especially Celestia," SteelHooves intoned. "But Fluttershy just wanted the war to end. That memory is the moment she put her whole Ministry to that purpose of finding a way to end the conflict. And she did."

I felt a shudder.

"In a world where not everyone is sane, it is the height of insanity to believe you could create a weapon so devastating, so horrible, that no one would dare use it."

Oh no.

I looked at Velvet Remedy as she slept. The same urge that made me discard the memory orb from Horseshoe Tower returned, grown an order of magnitude. She loved Fluttershy. Modeled herself after the sweet, shy yellow pegasus pony. She couldn't ever learn this.

"Wait," I said slowly, "You said no *one?"* His odd word choice reminded me of my first conversation with Watcher.

SteelHooves answered dreadfully, "Perhaps the only thing more insane than believing such a weapon would bring peace is creating such a weapon… and then giving it to both sides."

SteelHooves turned to me behind his helmet's visor. "That memory: that is the beginning of the end of the world. Ultimately, *Fluttershy killed us all.*"

* * *

We were circling the mountain, pushing upwards. It was night, and Calamity was taking the ascent slow as I guided him with my PipBuck's map.

"All right," he called back. "Ah was 'fraid of this. Looks like your Watcher friend lives high enough up this peak t' be above the cloud level. We could be okay, but… Well, t'ain't safe traveling above the clouds. Least nowhere there's civilization above."

Everypony was awake. (As was Pyrelight.) We all nodded, readying ourselves. I had no idea what to expect when we pushed through the cloud cover, but I doubted it would be a cheerful welcoming party with smiles and muffins.

Calamity flapped his wings, carrying us upward into the cloud curtain. It was like being plunged into a slightly damp fog. All I could see of the rust-colored pegasus pulling us through the sky was a hint of his orange tail.

A moment later, the Sky Bandit burst up through the cloud curtain and the night sky expanded infinitely around us filled with (evil?) stars. A beautiful full moon hung in the sky behind the mountain peak, silhouetting it like a vertical rip in the universe.

Velvet Remedy let out an awe-filled, "Ooooooooooooooooh!" Pyrelight gave a musical cry.

The jaws of vertigo clamped down around me. My legs went weak, my knees giving out. Irrational panic told me that I would somehow be sucked out one of the windows and fall endlessly up through space. Maybe one of the stars would get me.

I clutched the side of the passenger wagon, looking down at the clouds. That was much better and just as beautiful. The clouds were laced with silver from the moonlight, glowing with a gentle, calming light.

My eyes ("It was under 'E'!") spotted a glint of metal on one of the cliffs. I asked Calamity to pull us closer.

I had expected it was Watcher, or at least another sprite-bot. But instead it was an audio recorder. I floated it into the *Sky Bandit.*

"This had better not be from Watcher…" I said, starting to feel a touch pissed.

"Ah don't think so," Calamity said from in front of the wagon. I slipped the audio recorder away, looking out to spy what he saw. I kicked on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle.

Just in time, too. According to my PipBuck, I had found "Dragon Cave."

* * *

“I think maybe your friend sent us up here to get eaten,” Velvet Remedy said aloud, staring up at the huge, dark opening. The Sky Bandit lay parked on the cliff behind us. SteelHooves was helping Calamity out of the pulling harness.

“The PipBuck’s data is two hundred years old,” I assured her nervously. “So it was a Dragon Cave two hundred years ago. Anypony could live in there now.” Well, anypony with wings, anyway.

A freed Calamity trotted up to join us. “Well, y’all plan on waitin’ outside ’till the sun comes up?” Then, just in case we were, “Ah don’t recommend it.”

Velvet Remedy shook her head. “Of course not! Littlepip, you go first.”

Oh thanks a lot! I shot her a look.

“Well, Watcher is *your* friend.”

That remained to be seen. I took a step forward.

There was a heavy thud from inside. Something moved in the darkness, coming closer. Something *big!*

“Ursa Majors don’t grow wings, do they?” Velvet Remedy asked nervously, making me want to buck her. Hard. I was frightened enough already.

A dragon poked its head out of the cave! A huge, gigantic, *fully adult* dragon who could easily eat two ponies in one bite, even if one of them was SteelHooves. Three if two of them were Homage and myself.

“Hello, Littlepip. I’m Spike!” the dragon said in a voice that was neither as terrifying nor booming as I had expected.

“And don’t worry. I’m not going to eat you.”

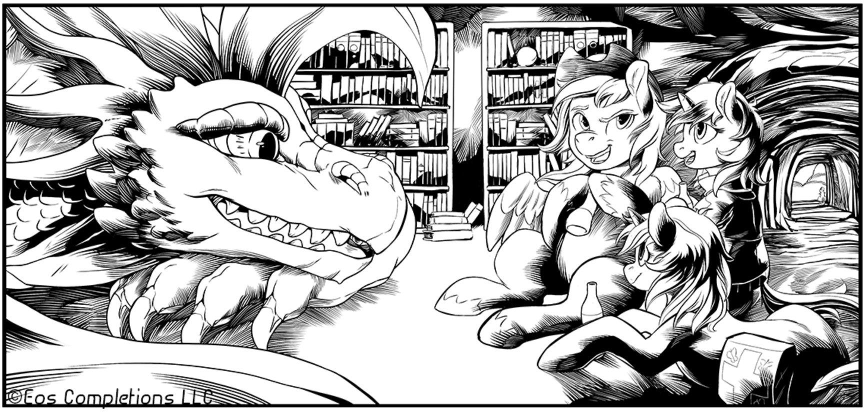
Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Pathfinder – Travel time to remote locations in the Equestrian Wasteland is reduced by 25%. The drain on the Sky Bandit’s spark batteries is likewise reduced.

Quest Perk added: Pony Sutra – You are experienced in the art of giving and receiving physical pleasure. You are more likely to have sexual encounters with specific characters.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Heart of Twilight Sparkle



"Have you ever watched the moon rise over the Wasteland? I wish I could have given you something as wonderful as that."

Dragon!

Really big, gigantic, enormous purple dragon with green spines and with claws and spikes and very, very sharp teeth and a huge mouth that had just promised not to eat us.

Well, that was a start.

I could hear the voices of my companions around me, but I couldn't turn my head. My gaze remained locked on the *dragon* staring down at us. I couldn't move. I could barely breathe.

"Calamity," Velvet Remedy whispered urgently. "Don't shoot it!"

"Ah weren't plannin' to," Calamity hissed back. "Girl, ya gotta let that go."

Pyrelight cried out and flew away, wings flapping with the sound of a crackling fireplace.

"Interesting," mused a deep rumble from SteelHooves' armor.

"Ah'd say he's a damn sight more'n interestin'!"

"He said he was Spike," SteelHooves said curiously. "He *didn't* say he was Watcher."

The dragon's gaze locked on me. He raised a very sharp claw the length of my whole body.

Addressing me, Spike-the-fully-grown-dragon asked, "They do know I can hear them, right?"

"Littlepip, Velvet Remedy, Calamity… please don't be afraid." Spike smiled, showing way too many sharp teeth. Dragons shouldn't smile when they're trying to not be intimidating. "You're welcome in my house. On one condition."

Watcher was setting conditions; that would have irked me, but this was his home. And Watcher was a dragon. Dragons got to set whatever conditions they wanted.

I was fully expecting something along the lines of *Don't steal, hoof through or touch my treasure.* I was not prepared for the dragon to point at SteelHooves with one lethal claw and say, *"That* stays outside."

Watcher had a problem with ghouls? That did irk me. Perhaps not quite so much as it would have after meeting Ditzy Doo and before learning about Rottingtail, but it still bothered me. "He's with us," I insisted, putting my hoof down.

"I breathe fire," Spike countered, winning the argument.

I turned to SteelHooves. "You okay with this?" After everything, part of me was ready to turn my back on Watcher and just walk away if SteelHooves said no.

"I'll be fine," SteelHooves answered. I felt unexpectedly relieved. "Besides, I won't be alone." SteelHooves' armor-sheathed tail jabbed towards the *Sky Bandit.* Pyrelight had taken shelter inside and was furtively peeking her head through one of the windows. Apparently, flying into the home of Equestria's largest predator was a bit much to ask or our new, feathered companion.

I nodded to SteelHooves then turned back to the dragon. "Okay."

Velvet Remedy was more gracious and diplomatic, giving Spike a courteous bow. "Thank you, mighty Spike, for allowing us into your house!" she barely paused before choosing to use the word he had.

Do dragons blush? Spike seemed to. He glanced back into the darkness behind him. "Well, it's really more of a cave. But I've fixed it up enough that it feels like a house."

"I'm sure you did splendidly," Velvet Remedy flattered.

Spike turned – we all ducked as his massive tail swung around – and led us into the cave. We followed, all except Pyrelight and SteelHooves. A pony in my head stomped insistently, wanting to know why I had just been required to leave a friend outside.

* * *

A dragon? Watcher was… a dragon?

The awe and I'm-about-to-get-eaten dread was washing away, and I was surprised to find that what tip-hoofed in to replace it was anger.

"It's delightful!" proclaimed Velvet Remedy. "I didn't know a dragon's cave could be so… homey." She turned around, taking in the scattered piles of gemstones surrounding an immense circular bed sunken into the floor. "And there are so many books. You must be a collector." The walls were lined with bookshelves, many of which were full. The cave continued on into the darkness through a massive fissure in the back wall.

"They're Twilight's," Spike said almost reflexively. Then, with a touch of sadness, he corrected himself. "Were Twilight's."

"Twilight Sparkle?" I asked, seeking to confirm my suspicions. I was already sure of the answer even before the dragon nodded. I was thinking of the audio message Homage had played for me, the one Rarity had left Twilight Sparkle. Twilight Sparkle had *not* gone to Pinkie Pie when she ran out of room for her books. She had started storing them here.

A single terminal sat on a pedestal near the bed, an only slightly fancier model than that found everywhere in the wasteland; a cable snaked deeper into the cave from the machine's back. I had been expecting something much more like Homage's setup in the M.A.S.E.B.S.

The little pony in my head was stomping more insistently. Finally, feeling just a touch cross, I bluntly asked, "Why did I tell SteelHooves to stay outside?"

"Uh… you didn't. I did," Spike said, as if I needed to be reminded of the flow of events. "The day a Steel Ranger steps hoof into my house is the day I eat canned food!" The ominous growl in his voice made it very clear what "can" he was talking about.

Okay, Spike didn't have a problem with ghouls. He had a problem with Steel Rangers. Or was it with the Ministry of Technology in general? From someone who spent his days jumping around sprite-bots, that would be a surprising attitude.

Velvet Remedy was still looking around, expressing admiration that the dragon was just soaking up. I suspected it had been a very long time since somepony had complimented him on anything, even something as simple as how well he kept the books dusted. Leave it to Velvet Remedy to know just what to say.

Particularly since I was feeling much less diplomatic. I bit my lip; I was seething just under the surface, and I couldn't put my hoof on why. I wondered if my emotional state was some sort of delayed PTM withdrawal. Or if I was just more tired than I realized. I'd spent most of the last four weeks, ever since leaving Stable Two, in a state of physical or mental exhaustion.

But Homage had pulled me through a miraculous (and multi-orgasmic) recovery. I should be in far more control than I was suddenly feeling. I looked away from Spike, staring at his huge bed. It did look comfortable. Plush with pillows and blankets, I'd even say it looked heavenly. I blushed hotly and shivered from something not related to cold as my brain conjured up mental images of what I would do with Homage (*to* Homage) on a bed like that. I looked away, clearing my throat.

Spike took the sound as a call for attention. "Oh, right. The Black Opal." He stretched out a purple paw, its expanse bigger than my whole body. "If you would, please?"

Courier pony at your service, I thought bitterly as I floated out the Black Opal and set it into his palm. "Why did you want this so badly?" I asked. He was a dragon. He was no more able to view the memory than an earth pony could. And I doubted that anypony had ever made a recollector in his (current) size.

"Because," he answered simply, "It was the last time Equestria's greatest mares, and my closest friends, were together." With a sadly nostalgic tone, he added, "All of us. In the same place, at the same time. And happy."

* * *

Twilight Sparkle. Rarity. Pinkie Pie. Applejack. Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy.

They were, in Spike's on words, the greatest heroines of Equestria. The mares who epitomized the six most important virtues of ponykind. The mares whose friendship had the power to change the world.

"How did it go so wrong?"

It was Velvet Remedy who asked, but I think we all needed to know. Spike was slow to answer, and much of what he told us I had already expected.

"Those ponies, my dearest friends, were not without their problems. They had their failings, even when they were young. But their virtues let them stand up to any hardship, and their friendship gave them a strength that they never had as individuals." Spike smiled nostalgically. But then the smile faded. "Even the greatest people have their flaws. And when put under pressure or in the right circumstances, those flaws can become cracks. They can break you."

"And with the Ministries, they weren't together anymore. And they were under pressure all the time…" Spike stopped. And then fiercely asserted, "Not that everything that went wrong can be laid at their hooves! Not even most of it!"

We all nodded, listening intently.

"First there was the war. Equestria had been at war for over a decade before Luna created the Ministries. War changes everything!" Spike informed us passionately. "Before that, Equestria had known peace for over a thousand years. We didn't know war. We didn't understand it. Maybe, if we'd had a few in the past, we wouldn't have made all the mistakes all at once."

The dragon's tail thumped, making gems and books and ponies jump.

"And then there were the Ministries themselves. The very epitome of good ideas and noble intentions gone wrong. And not by the fault of the mares who 'ran' them."

Velvet Remedy caught an inflection in Spike's words that I did not. "What do you mean? The Mares of the Ministries didn't actually run the Ministries?"

"Well, yes. And no." Spike pinched the bridge of his nose between two claws, wincing a bit. "How can I put this?"

We waited as the dragon gathered his thoughts.

"Of the six of them, only two even tried to run their Ministries. Those were Twilight Sparkle and Rarity. The others pretty much just threw suggestions at their Ministries and hoped for the best." Spike fought for words before finding an analogy he felt was suitable. (I found it rather an odd choice, myself).

"Think of the Ministries as dressmakers. They have their own ideas of how to make a good dress, but they are beholden to the sporadic demands of their clients – in this case, my friends, the Mares who have been put in charge of them – even when those clients don't have the first clue about the art of dressmaking. No matter how good the suggestions may seem, no matter how brilliantly skilled the dressmakers may be, they can still end up with a nightmare design."

Calamity broke in, "Ayep. 'Specially if what yer talkin' 'bout is more like a committee o' dressmakers, all competin' fer their vision." Spike agreed.

"Democracies tend t' make a mess outta everything," Calamity said with clear bitterness. "Only time they c'n act as one is when they're feelin' threatened."

I looked at my rust-coated companion, wondering: where that had come from? Oh… of course. Suddenly, I was very happy I didn't know more about pegasi politics.

* * *

"Ah don't get it," Calamity commented. "Why ya hidin' in here? Ain't like there's much a dragon needs t' hide from." He cocked his head thoughtfully, "Ah mean, a really ticked-off Ursa Major, maybe."

And that's when I knew why I was mad. His words were like an earthquake, opening a fissure of reason to the anger simmering just beneath the surface. My response was natural: I erupted.

"All this time, you've been a dragon! A *DRAGON!* All. This. Time!"

Spike looked at me, startled.

"uh, Littlepip," Calamity cautioned. "Please don't upset the really big dragon."

I stomped, fuming now. "Do you have any idea how much good you could have done? How many lives you could have saved?" I found myself advancing on the dragon in my fury. I would have facehoofed at the preposterousness of my own actions had I not been blinded by righteous anger. Spike's backing away from me only heightened the absurdity of it.

"Don't tell me you don't care," I spat. "I *know* you care! You've been *watching.* Why aren't you out there *doing something!* The Equestrian Wasteland needs someone like you!"

Spike looked abashed, but insisted, "I have my reasons."

"Reasons?!" I attacked, "Afraid of getting your own claws bloody? Hell, the Ponyville Raiders couldn't have even scratched your scales! But no, you'd rather send a little mare fresh out of a Stable with virtually no combat experience into a pit of raiders where she's more likely to get killed than to save anypony." I was huffing. My mane and tail were in disarray. Part of me seriously wanted to charge Watcher. Maybe with all my telekinesis behind it, my horn could give him a jab he might actually feel.

"Littlepip…"

"What reasons? What could possibly be more important!?"

I was screaming at the dragon. All the times I had put my own life at risk to help others, and the person who had set me on that path was a *nigh-invulnerable dragon* yet couldn't be bothered to leave the house? "What, do you need to polish your gems? Count them? Maybe take a nap?"

Spike flinched. Seeing that was like dumping fuel on the fire. I opened my mouth and let out a barrage I didn't know I had in me.

"Enough!" boomed Spike, finally sounding like a dragon. I cringed, suddenly remembering that I was small and probably tasty. The single word slammed me into silence.

The dragon turned away from me, looking to my friends. "Do you trust Littlepip?"

"Ayep!" said Calamity without hesitation.

"Yes, I do," chimed in Velvet Remedy. I felt a pang, knowing that I might have hesitated had our places been reversed. While I forgave her, I still felt the pain of her betrayal, no matter how well-intentioned and beneficial it had been.

"All right. Then I will tell Littlepip my reasons. But only Littlepip. And only on the promise that she never tell anyone else. Not even you."

"Why?" Velvet Remedy asked politely. I would have demanded an answer.

Spike scowled deeply. "You've seen memory orbs. You know that there are ponies who can rip a thought from you with their magics. And the so-called Goddess who commands the alicorns is telepathic. And through her, so are they."

I was struck with a new image of the alicorns as terminals linked to a maneframe. Sending and receiving messages from and through it. This is how they knew when and how one of their own had died – their Goddess observed their death through the alicorn's mind and then sent the knowledge on to all the rest.

"The fewer who know, the smaller the risk that someone might rip that knowledge from you and use it against…" He paused before concluding with, "me."

I frowned. If Watcher's reason for being Watcher was that dire, then Spike was taking a massive risk just telling me. My outburst alone couldn't be cause enough to break two hundred years of silence.

Or was it an opportunity? Again, I got the impression that the dragon was desperately lonely in his self-imposed exile.

On the other hoof, Spike could just be full of horseapples. "All right," I stated firmly. "I'll agree to that condition… but only if your reason is good!"

Spike contemplated that for just a moment before seeming to accept it. He stared to Calamity and Velvet Remedy. "And will Littlepip's word that my reason is 'good' be enough for you two, without ever hearing what it is?"

"Yeah," Calamity said, frowning. "Ah trust Littlepip's judgment. If she says ya got good cause t' leave the rest o' the folk out their on their own, that's good 'nuff fer me."

Velvet Remedy nodded. "Of course."

"Then follow me, Littlepip. I have something to show you." The huge purple dragon turned and lumbered further into the cave, passing through the fissure in the wall.

I gave Calamity and Velvet Remedy one last look, and then trotted after him, nearly needing to gallop to keep up.

* * *

"What am I looking at?" I asked for the second time in my life.

We had traveled into the center of the mountain peak – I had soon realized we were following the cable from Spike's terminal – and now I stood in a vast chamber, large enough for the dragon to move around easily.

Along the walls were maneframes, half a dozen of them, with gemstones that pulsed with magical energy. They all seemed to be nearly dormant save for the closest one, which beeped busily. In the center of the room, like a gigantic stalagmite of magic and steel, rose the tapering column of a super-maneframe that made DJ Pon3's systems look downright quaint. Massive, insulated wires ran up the walls from the tops of the maneframes, then swooped across the chamber to attach around the column at a point well above Spike's head.

The chamber was a chimney. Staring upwards, I could see far above us a rough circle of night's sky, twinkling with stars. The super-maneframe was pointed towards that hole like a colossal magical wand.

"A Crusader Maneframe," Spike answered.

The ultimate arcano-technological maneframe. So powerful it could think for itself. Learn. It could even hold the imprint of a pony's mind. Only three had ever been built, I remembered. One was installed in Stable Twenty-Nine. One went to the Ministry of Awesome. And one… this one… came here.

A platform radiated out from the base of the Crusader like a six-pointed star, each point ending in a dais. Upon each dais rested a fine pillow upon which sat a single piece of jewelry. The one closest to me was a beautiful tiara. The other that I could see clearly was a necklace.

"Are you…" I looked at Spike, suddenly questioning my assumptions. "Is *this* Watcher?"

Spike chuckled. "No. I'm Watcher. This is a Crusader Maneframe. A very special one."

"What does it do?" I asked, my curiosity beating down my anger. "Except let you hack sprite-bots and spy on ponies." Something this incredible couldn't be here for a purpose so… pedestrian.

"Right now, nothing," Spike told me. I felt the little pony in my head cry out in disappointment. "It's waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"Waiting for who."

I looked at Spike blankly.

Spike seemed to bulwark himself. I sensed the plunge he was about to take frightened him. "This is Twilight Sparkle's greatest and most important project. She poured her heart into this. In the end, it was more important to her than anything else…"

Spike trailed off, looking to me as if pleading that I could grasp how meaningful his words were. I nodded, waiting for him to continue. I was reserving judgment, but already felt sure that Spike's "reasons" were, if not good enough for myself or other ponies, truly of vital importance to him.

"She commissioned this Crusader, and worked on it herself in every private moment she had. Creating a maneframe which could cast a very special spell…"

I blinked, jaw dropping. "What? All this…" I waved a hoof, "Just to cast a spell?"

Spike glared at me and I shut up. "Not just a spell. A megaspell. One more powerful and more complicated than any other megaspell ever conceived. Twilight Sparkle wouldn't have been able to cast it – the most powerful magical pony born in a thousand years – and she created it. *Gardens of Equestria* was beyond what even Celestia or Luna could hope to cast."

"Gardens of Equestria?"

"Yes," Spike answered. "A single spell, powered by the Elements of Harmony, calculated and cast by a magically augmented Crusader Maneframe. A single spell that would affect the entirety of Equestria, cleansing it of radiation and taint, restoring it to the beautiful paradise it once was before the other megaspells twisted and poisoned it."

Oh. My. Goddesses.

I stared, eyes wide, unbelieving even though I could tell it was true. One spell. One single spell that could fix… well, not everything, but it would mend the soul of our mortally wounded land.

"Then why…" I asked slowly, an ache building up inside me. A beautiful, restored Equestria… "Why hasn't it been cast?"

Spike spoke with almost infinite sadness. "Because the ponies who can use the Elements of Harmony are dead."

⁂

I moved around the Crusader, looking at each Element of Harmony in turn. I stopped when I reached the necklace with a balloon-shaped gemstone.

I went to the get-together at Spike's place and brought It *just like you asked. All of my friends were there but you…*

"Twilight Sparkle entrusted you with the Element of Magic, didn't she?"

"She entrusted me with all of this," Spike answered. "I can't leave. If a band of raiders should make their way into this place while I'm gone… or worse, a troop of Steel Rangers…"

He didn't need to say anything more.

"I can't take the risk that someone might damage or destroy this," Spike said anyway. "I have to stay here. Keep guard. Until I can find the right ponies."

I sat down next to the Laughter Dais, my eyes wet. The raw emotions stirred by what I was seeing and hearing were too much.

"For nearly two hundred years," Spike admitted morosely, "I have been searching out ponies who seemed like they were virtuous. Helping them. Setting them on a path to find more like themselves. All in the hopes of one day finding the right six ponies. Magic. Kindness. Laughter. Generosity. Honesty. And… loyalty."

My heart broke for the dragon. "All that time?"

He gave a bark of hurting laughter. "You wouldn't believe how hard it is just for a pony to find five friends in the blasted horror of the wasteland." He looked down, his eyes taking me in. "Well, actually, you do."

"Does it have to be six?" I asked.

"In all of Equestria's history, there has only been one pony who has ever been able to wield more than one. (Trust me, I have a lot of books on the subject.) And that was Celestia. She used the power of the Elements of Harmony to banish the monster her sister had turned into. Only with the Elements can magic that powerful be cast. And only Celestia had the ability to use them all."

"Then… Why didn't she?" A thought struck me. "For that matter, why didn't she just send all the damn zebras to the moon?"

"Because she's dead too," Spike informed me bluntly. "And even when she wasn't, she couldn't use them anymore. They were no longer *hers* to use."

I stared up at the nearest dais. The tiara, Spike had informed me earlier, was the Element of Magic. I found myself reminded just how pathetically un-magical I was. For all the raw power I had learned to tap, I was truly a one-trick pony.

A dark realization washed over me.

"It… it's not us, is it?" I looked around at the daises and then back to Spike. "We're not the right group of friends either. We can't bring Equestria back." I felt my heart tearing. "You're still looking."

Spike nodded sorrowfully. "No. You're not." He snorted laughter again. "Don't feel bad about it though. You're an amazing pony, and you have amazing friends. I have no doubt that the group of you will do a lot of good for the Equestrian Wasteland. It's just not your destiny to heal it."

A beautiful, green, healthy Equestria… full of life… just a spell away. And I was… insufficient. I'd never felt more worthless.

"Hey," Spike scolded, reading my expression. "It's not your fault. Hell, imagine how hard it is to find a pony with the virtue of laughter in the Equestrian Wasteland."

I thought of Ditzy Doo, and felt a spark of hope. *We* might be the wrong ponies. But maybe I could start Spike on the right path to finding the ones who are. "I think I know who you're looking for."

* * *

I swore that I would never speak a word of what Spike had shown me. I almost wished he hadn't. The consequences of an enemy learning of what Spike was protecting in this place was no less than the doom of Equestria's greatest hope. It was a heavy secret even for a dragon. And I was a very small pony.

On our way back to the others, I noticed something that Spike had unintentionally blocked my view of before. Set high into the wall was a glass case. In the case were six statuettes. I knew them well. I already had four of my own.

I couldn't see them properly, nor could I read their inscriptions, without floating myself up to them. I felt that would be inappropriate.

"What happened to them?" I asked suddenly. Spike stopped, looking back at me, then trailing my gaze up to the display case.

"I mean, I know what happened to Pinkie Pie. But what happened to the rest of them?"

Spike's jaw clenched frighteningly. "I don't know."

"You… don't know? I mean, you were there, right?"

"I. Don't. Know." He repeated, sounding threatening.

I took a step back, swallowing hard, suspecting that I had crossed a line, and probably destroyed any bonding that had begun in the chamber behind us. I stared at the floor. "Oh… Of course… you were *here.*"

The dragon's voice boomed with anger and self-incrimination and regret: **"I was *asleep!*"**

Yet again, I found myself staring at the dragon. The huge, purple, powerful dragon who had somehow slept through the apocalypse.

"I just needed to take a nap! I figured that if anything important happened, someone would wake me up" Spike cried, his voice brimming with a self-loathing that made my own self-hatreds seem petty and small. **"I should have been there! I should have been with her! She was my closest friend! *She shouldn't have died alone!* But instead, *I was asleep!*"**

"I'm… I'm so sorry," I said, my voice trembling. I put a hoof on his scales in a feeble attempt to comfort him. He was too big to hug.

Spike just stood there, unmoving, lost in an ocean of his own regrets. He didn't cry. I suspect that the tears this pain could wring from him had all been shed over a century ago. So I cried for him.

I understood it. This mountain was in the middle of nowhere. Days' travel from any hint of civilization. It would have been nearly impossible for even the sounds of the megaspells to reach this far, easily mistakable as thunder. The flashes of light might have pierced the cave… but after the very first hit, the pegasus ponies had closed up the sky.

When Spike had gone to sleep, all his friends were still alive. Equestria was struggling through the darkest part of its history, but there was hope it could pull through. When he woke up, Equestria was gone. His friends were dead. The sky was cloud-locked and the land below was nothing but blighted, poisonous wastes.

I wondered how he had ever been able to sleep again.

⁂

"I just want you to remember," Spike told me as we approached the main room of his 'house', "That *Gardens of Equestria* was the real gift that Twilight Sparkle gave to all of us."

His voice took on a slightly hard edge. "I know that as you travel, as you poke your nose into places and memories, you're going to hear things or learn things about my Twi. But this… what you saw back there… that is the *true* heart of Twilight Sparkle."

"I won't forget," I promised.

"And remember, this is your secret now. And my little breakdown back there? That's a secret too. You breathe one word of that, and I'll eat you," Spike said dourly. Then cracked a smirk, "Or, for that matter, if you make any jokes about a grown guy playing with dolls."

Calamity and Velvet Remedy looked up at us as we returned. From Velvet's expression, she could tell I had been crying. "It's a good reason," I said simply.

They both nodded, clearly willing to accept it.

An awkward silence fell over the room.

Calamity glanced nervously towards the entrance. Somewhere out there were the other pegasi, a whole civilization that had once been his home. To his family and friends, he was now a Dashite. A traitor. Was he thinking about them? Missing them? Or was he worried about what his own kind would do, not to himself but to his friends, should they catch us up here?

Velvet Remedy fidgeted with her saddleboxes – medical kits that had seen far too much use patching up wounds inflicted by violence. The singer and aspiring medical pony, a pacifist by nature to whom the thought of harming another pony was abhorrent, now wore three weapons, one of them a combat shotgun. She'd stopped speaking to us like we were capable of horrible things because now she knew just what we were capable of. Instead, she retreated into a fantasy world that was more of a minefield than she could ever know.

Spike…

I could almost feel the pain everyone was hiding.

"Tell us about them," I said, breaking the silence. Everyone turned to me.

"Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy and the others. You knew them, Spike. Tell us about what they were like when they were younger." When they were happy. Tell us of the good times, Spike. Everyone here needs to hear that. Including, if not especially, you.

⁂

"Wait, wait, wait…" I gasped. "She got them to let her go by *whining?*"

Calamity was laughing, "And give up all them jewels t' boot?"

Spike nodded, a big smile on the dragon's face.

"I'll have to remember that," Velvet Remedy said with dangerous silkiness.

"Great, Spike," Calamity muttered. "Ya doomed us all."

I clopped my hooves on the cave floor in applause. "Tell us another one!"

This was good. Calamity had cheered up immeasurably at the tale of how about Rainbow Dash had stood up against her own for the buffalo. Velvet Remedy had virtually fan-gasmed over Fluttershy's caring for a sick phoenix. And I could tell that talking about all of them, especially Twilight Sparkle, was doing Spike a world of good.

I opened my saddlebags, pulling out Sparkle~Colas for each of us. One of the bottles had wedged itself against the audio recorder I had found on the cliffside, forcing me to shake it loose. Part of me felt bad that SteelHooves couldn't be in here with us sharing these memories. But I understood all too much why Spike didn't want a knight of the Ministry of Technology poking around his lair. Instead, I tried to memorize the stories so that we could share them with him.

"Okay, here's another one. This is the story about Twilight Sparkle's first Winter Wrap-Up."

"What's a Winter Wrap-Up?" Calamity asked, opening the Sparkle~Cola I had passed to him. Carrot-flavored liquid erupted in his face. He shot me a look.

"Oh, come on," I chortled. "I owed you that for the Ministry of Awesome!"

He glowered, then chuckled. Velvet Remedy floated him a cloth to wipe his face.

Spike watched us with amusement, waiting for Calamity to dry himself before answering. "Well, that's when the ponies of Ponyville would clean up the winter so that spring could start properly." As he looked at us, I could see it dawning on him that none of us had the slightest clue what he was talking about. Two of us were from Stables and had never experienced a winter. Calamity had been an outcast long enough to have been through a few, but only wild winters that wrapped themselves up on their own. The pegasi had long stopped aiding the passing of the seasons.

"Well, normally in Equestria, one season would be aided to finish neat-and-tidy by magic. But Ponyville was founded by earth ponies, and it was tradition to help wrap up winter the earth pony way. Without magic."

"But they had unicorns and pegasi living their too," Velvet Remedy questioned. "So why didn't they use magic?"

Spike nodded. "I thought it was silly the first time too. First half-dozen times, actually. Wasn't until I visited Fillydelphia that I understood."

"Understood what?" I asked.

"Well, it's more difficult for earth ponies," Spike explained. "They don't have magic. They don't have wings. A lot of the time, they have to work three times as hard to get half as much done. But they will, without a complaint. You won't find ponies as proud or stubborn as earth ponies."

I took Spike's words as the generality they were, although I wondered how they might apply to our friend clad in steel.

"Of course, earth ponies are exceptionally innovative. Wait until I tell you the story of when Pinkie Pie chased down Rainbow Dash and a griffin with a crazy flying machine! They're always looking for a way to do more work more easily. That's why earth ponies have always been the ones to push technological progress. Equestria probably wouldn't have ever come up with the wheel if it wasn't for earth ponies."

"Ah believe it," Calamity agreed. "Well, the part 'bout the wheel. Ah don't believe no earth pony coulda kept pace with Rainbow Dash."

I smiled at that.

Spike returned to his story. "It all started with Twilight waking me up waaaay too early **and I told you that you are not welcome in here!**"

I turned, knowing that SteelHooves must have walked into the cave. Maybe he overheard our voices and wanted to say something about earth ponies. That would certainly fit the proud and stubborn label.

SteelHooves was backing into the cave.

Not good.

"Sorry to intrude," the Steel Ranger said. "But you have more company. Fry me if you must, but you might want to deal with them first."

Calamity's voice was nearly a growl as he said: "Them?"

Four pegasus ponies completely entombed in nightmarish black Pegasus Enclave armor flew into the room, landing in front of us.

Spike reacted immediately. The green-spined purple dragon drew himself up to his full height, snorting flame and spreading his wings wide. **"YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!"**

They stood their ground, although two of them backed up a pony's length.

"Seems you have some other guests," the lead Enclave pegasus said casually.

"They are here at my invitation. You. Are. Not!"

The lead pegasus spread his forehooves in a disarming gesture. "We're just here to make sure they find their way safely back beneath the clouds," he said amiably.

"Ah think we c'n find our way ourselves." Calamity had lowered into a fighting stance. He kicked a handle below the bite-piece of his battle saddle – a lever that had not been there before Tenpony Tower; I heard a clicking inside the battle saddle as the ammo type changed. I was certain he had just swapped in armor-piercing rounds.

"Don't shoot them," Velvet Remedy hissed to Calamity. "Let us at least try diplomacy first."

"Well lookee who it is!" one of the female Enclave pegasi called out with a whistle. "We got ourselves a Dashite!"

"Not just any Dashite," one of the other black-clad males spoke up. "That's Deadshot Calamity."

"Horseapples!" I heard Calamity mutter under his breath.

The lead pegasus looked between my friend and the pegasus who had identified him. "You sure?"

"Oh yeah. Winner of the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years running? You don't forget the pony who beat you."

"Gutshot?" Calamity whispered, eyes going wide.

The leader's compound visor turned towards Calamity, locking him in its glowing, fire-colored glare. "Well I'll be. Decorated military officer to murderous traitor…" The gems on his battle saddle's antenna-like weapons began to glow a fierce yellow-orange that matched his visor. "Sorry, dragon, but this changes things."

Spike didn't seem to think so. **"Go. While I still let you."** The dragon was growing impatient.

"You seem to forget who is in charge up here, dragon," the leader said, still speaking gently. "Now we'll be going, as a gesture of goodwill. But we'll be taking that criminal there into custody." He pointed a hoof at Calamity.

"You seem to forget who is tasty and good with ketchup."

"Hey now…" The mare in sinister black magically-powered armor spoke up again, "Look, dragon… sir. The reward for this one's head is worth a pretty nice pile o' gems. Far tastier than any pony. Tell you what: let us take him, the reward is yours."

Spike paused. Blinked. "Gems?"

Oh no… he wouldn't. Not after everything he just told us about friends, especially his friends…

The pegasus nodded. "A lot of gems!"

"A lot of gems?"

"Yep!"

Spike cocked his head, as if listening to a voice we couldn't hear. "You've barged into my house and tried to bribe me with gems, asking me to betray one of my guests to you… a guest who you have named after a pony who was not only a good friend of mine, but the bearer of the Element of Loyalty?"

"uh… yes?" The Enclave mare didn't seem to like where this was going. I, on the other hoof, felt a sense of relief. I permitted myself to crack a smile.

Spike reached forward with one claw and dropped it onto her back, pinning her against the floor. He leaned very, very close to the mare, then used another claw to lift up her visor so that they were staring at each other eye-to-eye.

Spike snorted a gout of flame into the magical armor through the open visor, setting the Enclave mare on fire inside her enclosed suit. She screamed and thrashed for an unbearably long second or two before perishing. Smoke curled out of seems in the insectoid metal carapace.

I heard Calamity bite back a strangled sound as I gagged from the smell. I didn't think I'd be eating cooked meat for a long time.

"oh Goddesses…" moaned Velvet Remedy.

Spike raised his claw again. The other Enclave pegasi fled into the night.

"Well. This is going to be trouble."

* * *

"We should stay. We should help."

"Ah ain't exactly gung-ho t' start shootin' at folk who could be muh kin. But Ah'll do what it takes t' make this right."

Spike shook his head. "No. It will be better if none of you are here when they return. Once they see that their prize is gone, they will have less reason to press the matter."

I looked at Spike worriedly. "What if they… look deeper?"

"I won't give them that option."

SteelHooves, now standing in the mouth of the cave, suggested, "If there's something here you don't want them looking at, then we'd best make sure the pegasi *know* we are somewhere else." He turned to Calamity. "We should stay above the clouds for a bit."

Calamity nodded. "Get ourselves seen somewhere that ain't here." He looked to me, "Whatcha say? Head back towards New Appleloosa, drop down an' make a turn towards Junction R-7 after we've been spotted?"

"It would give us a chance to lighten our load," Velvet Remedy added approvingly. "Get Calamity's workbench set up."

I nodded. It was agreed. We would draw the pegasi's attention away from Spike's cave. I just hoped they didn't start shooting at us. Although if we did go up in an explosive blaze of glory, it might very well be worth it to keep the *Gardens of Equestria* safe.

"Before we go," Velvet Remedy said to Spike, "I did have one question you might be able to answer." My heart skipped a beat. Please, I begged silently, don't let it be about Fluttershy!

"Sure," Spike said amiably.

"What are those towers?" Velvet asked, much to my relief. "The tall, slender white ones? As we were flying here, I saw several of them. They're the only things I've seen as tall as this mountain, and they're definitely pony-made."

"They were for the Single Pony Project," Spike answered, speaking simultaneously with Calamity.

"Them's the Sustainable Pegasi Project," Calamity had stated. Spike and Calamity looked at each other.

Okie, dokey, lokey. "The Single Pony Project?" I asked. Calamity looked a touch hurt that I didn't turn to his expertise first. "You've mentioned that before. What was the project for?"

Spike opened his mouth, then paused. The dragon raised a claw, then stopped. Finally, he admitted, "I actually have no idea. I spent all my time with Twilight. I don't really know much about what the other Ministries were up to. All I know is that it was called the Single Pony Project, that it was Rainbow Dash's idea, and that it was pretty much the only thing the Ministry of Awesome did."

"Only *official* thing," SteelHooves interjected.

I turned to Calamity now, "Sustainable Pegasi Project?"

"Well, Ah can't say fer sure it weren't the Single Pony Project at some point…" Calamity chewed on what the dragon had said. "Ah was told otherwise, but it ain't like Ah ain't got no reason t' doubt anythin' just cuz the Great Pegasus Enclave declares it t' be true."

Velvet Remedy looked particularly pained at this spectacular mangling of proper grammar.

"An' iffin it were Rainbow Dash who come up with it, then Ah really doubt she woulda meant fer those towers t' be bein' used fer what they all are usin' them fer now. Cuz right now, they're being used t' help keep the pegasus ponies isolated from the rest of y'all."

"How so?"

Calamity turned to Velvet Remedy. "Remember when ya asked about what we ate up here, an' Ah joked 'bout cloud seedin'?"

Velvet Remedy nodded. "I recall that I was going to demand a proper answer later."

"Yeah, well, now yer gonna get it," Calamity said. "I dunno what them towers were originally meant t' do. But Ah know what the Enclave has repurposed 'em t' do. And that's t' enchant the clouds fer miles around 'em so that we c'n grow crops right up in the sky."

I let out a whistle at that. From somewhere outside, Pyrelight whistled back.

Made sense. No matter what the Single Pony Project had been meant to be, the towers were now being used to suit the purposes of the surviving ponies. The pegasus ponies were using them up above for agriculture up above. Homage was using them below to broadcast DJ Pon3's music and messages across the Equestrian Wasteland. *("Bringing you the truth, no matter how bad it hurts!")* And Red Eye was using one for the Goddesses-knew-what.

My thoughts drifted to Homage.

I hadn't told Homage about SteelHooves' deception. He'd used DJ Pon3's radio broadcast to spread his lie about Chief Grim Star. (I had to wonder how somepony like SteelHooves managed to find himself in a romantic relationship with the mare of the Element of Honesty.) I expected that Homage would be personally offended. I didn't want to be the bearer of a message that caused her pain. But I didn't keep my mouth shut *just* because I didn't want to upset her.

She might feel provoked to air what I told her, even though I could offer no evidence to back it up. Yet what good would that serve?

More likely, I suspected she would choose not to air it. Like my struggles with addiction, or her real identity, sometimes secrets had their place. Homage understood that. That wonderful unicorn had more personal integrity than any pony I'd ever met, and I couldn't bear to put her in a morally uncomfortable position. Especially not after Monterey Jack.

I was brought out of my reverie by the jab of Velvet Remedy's hoof. "Still with us, Littlepip?"

I nodded. The others were already gathering back at the *Sky Bandit.* It was time to go. We wanted to be moving before the Pegasus Enclave returned.

I trotted to the mouth of the cave and then looked back towards Spike. "I guess… this is it then?" Watcher had helped me; without him I might not have survived. He helped give me purpose, a goal… and ultimately friendship. But now it was clear that we were not the ponies he was looking for. And he needed to focus his attention elsewhere.

Spike nodded. "I'll keep an eye open for you. We may talk again. But… yes, this is it."

"Thank you, Spike."

"Thank you, Littlepip."

I turned, and walked out of the cave.

I was about to step into the Sky Bandit when I was hit by an epiphany. Turning, I galloped back into the cave.

Honesty. It was about more than just telling the truth. It was about integrity.

"Spike!" I cried out. "I know one of the other ponies you're looking for!"

* * *

Two black-carapaced pegasi were still hot on our tails as we broke beneath the cloud-curtain.

"Ha!" shouted Calamity, wings flapping hard as he hauled the Sky Bandit through the air at breakneck speed. “Told ya they wouldn’t follow us below the clouds! Cowards!”

Velvet Remedy looked at the two demonic silhouettes behind us, her hair whipping across her face. “They’re still following us!”

“What?!” Calamity glanced back over his shoulder. “Oh horseapples!” Somehow, he managed to pour on even more speed.

We were pulling ahead. I saw the gemstones of the Enclave battle saddles flare, and bolts of colored light shot past us. Thankfully, neither of these pegasi had Calamity’s aim.

“Calamity, could you please kindly lose these ponies?” Velvet asked with an almost seductive smoothness. “I’d really hate to get blown up today.”

Two more blasts of magical energy shot past us, one actually passing through one shattered window of the passenger wagon and out another, barely missing Pyrelight. The magical bird squawked and hid behind Velvet, who cooed at her comfortingly.

“Wow,” SteelHooves commented dryly. “They really don’t like you, do they.”

“Y’all c’n shut it now,” Calamity barked back at us. “An’ hold on!”

I wrapped my forelegs around one of the poles between the wagon’s bench seats. Velvet Remedy clamped down on one of the bits that dangled from the ceiling. (From her expression, she immediately regretted it. I could only imagine the taste!) SteelHooves braced himself between benches. A moment later, Calamity took the *Sky Bandit* into a steep dive. Pyrelight bounced off the wagon’s ceiling. She scrambled to bite down on Velvet Remedy’s wind-thrashed mane before the wind threw her out the back window of the wagon. Bolts of colored light shot all around us. I think I screamed.

The Enclave pegasi broke off their pursuit about halfway to the ground.

* * *

My legs were still shaking, my hooves thankful to be planted on firm ground.

I watched as Velvet Remedy bartered with Ditzy Doo outside the front gate of New Appleloosa, trading for spark batteries to replace the nearly drained ones in the *Sky Bandit.* We weren’t allowed further, but the ghoul pesagus was more than happy to come out and greet us. For a moment, I didn’t recognize the little lavender filly who shyly followed behind her. My eyes widened as I realized it was Silver Bell. No longer painted pink.

She seemed… better. Being with Ditzy Doo was good for her.

Silver Bell looked up, recognizing Velvet Remedy. She froze in her tracks.

“Hello, Silver Bell,” Velvet Remedy said gently. “You’re looking beautiful this morning.”

Silver Bell looked everywhere but at Velvet.

“I have someone you might like to meet,” Velvet continued, her voice warm and accepting. “Pyrelight, come out and meet Silver Bell.”

The little filly’s eyes went wide at the sight of the majestic balefire phoenix. The emerald and gold creature landed next to her and cooed a friendly hello. The effect on Silver Bell was dramatic – it was as if Pyrelight was the first truly beautiful thing the girl had ever seen!

Calamity walked up next to me. “Call me crazy, but after we go, Ah half expect that filly t’ spend the next few days tryin’ t’ make New Appleloosa as pretty as that bird.”

I could so picture that.

I looked up at Calamity. The rust-colored pegasus with the orange mane and black desperado hat was probably the closest friend I had. (Not counting Homage, who was all manner of closer, but much more than a friend.)

"Ah know what yer thinkin'," Calamity stated. "Don'tcha believe 'em. The Enclave has a vested interest in makin' anypony who bucks their ideals inta a monster."

"I believe you," I told him sincerely. I regularly put my life, and the lives of those I loved, in Calamity's care. I absolutely trusted him with this too. "But, Calamity, if you're running from something, perhaps we can help."

Calamity laughed. "Li'lpip, ya should know me well 'nuff by now t' know runnin' away from things ain't my way."

My friend turned his head towards the ever-present cloud cover. "Ah flew *towards* somethin'. They jus' didn't wanna let me go."

* * *

"Nice place you got here," SteelHooves said as he looked around Junction R-7. I couldn't be sure if he was being sarcastic or speaking truthfully.

"Home sweet train-wreck."

SteelHooves eyed the turret defenses, then looked up at the tri-barreled magical energy cannon mounted on the roof of the train's incongruous engine. "Oh, now that is a beauty!"

I could hear Calamity setting up his workshop. I looked around, but could not see where Velvet Remedy had wandered off to. Hopefully, she was getting some sleep. I knew I needed some. Our next stop was going to be Fillydelphia. I didn't know if we would actually find Red Eye there, but everything I had learned said that all his slave operations were centered in that foul place.

It was time to start putting some things right.

Spike's words rang in my head. *I know that as you travel, as you poke your nose into places and memories, you're going to hear things or learn things about my Twi.* I had sworn I would remember, as he called it, the real heart of Twilight Sparkle. I couldn't imagine forgetting, now that I had seen it for myself. The sight of that Crusader maneframe, surrounded by the Elements of Harmony, sitting and waiting… year after year, decade after decade for the chosen ponies to put right things that were far beyond my ability to effect…

I would say "collecting dust", but they hadn't been dusty. Spike, I realized, had been dutifully tending to the Elements of Harmony and the maneframe.

How hard would it be to remember if I had nothing like that sight to cling to?

Right now, I had another private moment with SteelHooves. I should make the best of it. I wanted to ask him about Applejack… but I didn't think we were ready for that conversation yet; I felt I would be prying into someplace I hadn't yet earned the right to go.

But I had other friends, including one I worried was heading towards a shattering reality-crash. I had no idea what to do for her, but I felt that knowing as much as I could beforehoof would give me my best chance to at least help her recover if I couldn't protect her from the tragic discovery.

"SteelHooves… what happened to Fluttershy?"

The Steel Ranger stopped in mid-trot and turned his visor towards me. "Depends on who you ask," he answered cryptically.

"Nopony knows?" I asked, having really hoped for a more definitive answer than that. Preferably one that I could mine for a little hope.

SteelHooves shook his head. "Keep in mind, it's really hard to pin down what happened to any particular pony. Skeletons don't come with nametags. And there were millions of ponies for whom the megaspells didn't even leave that. Some places, like Splendid Valley and the Canterlot Ruins, are still far too dangerous for proper expeditions. It's rare that you can say for certain what happened, even to a loved one."

Oh dear. I nodded slowly.

"That said, most ponies… well, those who ever think of or even know about Fluttershy beyond the Ministry of Peace posters… believe that she was so devastated by what had happened to Equestria and to the world because of her efforts to force peace that she plodded into one of the really bad places and let nature tear her apart. Let Equestria do to her what she had done to it."

I cringed. This wasn't what I had hoped for.

"There are other tales. Some claimed she leapt to her death from the top of the Ministry of Peace in the Canterlot Ruins."

"Wasn't she a pegasus?"

SteelHooves nickered. "Yes. But then, just being *outside* in Canterlot would have been death sentence enough." I looked at the ground. It just kept getting worse. "And then there are the ponies who say she wandered into the Everfree Forest and became a tree."

"Wait. *What!?"* I demanded, jaw on the ground. "How could that even happen?!"

SteelHooves gave a shrug. "Don't ask me. I've always been in the Fluttershy-committed-suicide camp, myself." He snorted. "Still, Everfree is a bizarre and twisted place. It became vastly more warped and deadly after the apocalypse… although Luna knows why. It wasn't even hit."

The Steel Ranger turned away. "Only thing everypony can agree on: Fluttershy lived through the Apocalypse… long enough, at least, for the full horror of it all – the death of innumerable ponies and animals, the poisoning and disfiguring of the land itself – to be ground into her soul."

I collapsed onto my haunches, feeling heartsick.

"This is the Equestrian Wasteland. It's nothing if not cruel."

⁂

"Well, this was a bust.

"Spike's asleep. I could wake him, but why would I do that to the poor guy. To wake up to all of this? Better to let him sleep. Have good dreams for just a while longer.

"Hey, dragons can sleep for up to a hundred years, right? Maybe Spike will get lucky and not wake up until Equestria's had time to heal. Although I don't know if a hundred years will be enough…"

"Seeing the sun like this, I can almost believe it never happened. Clouds hide the view below. I'm beginning to think that's the idea.

"They call me a traitor now. Me! After all I did for them! They turn their backs on Equestria and they have the nerve to call ME a traitor!

"They've even hired a mercenary now to hunt me down. Bring them back my head. Neck need not be attached, of course.

"She's good. The best. I'm better. And she knows it…"

A second voice sounded on the audio recording, gruffer than the mare's,

"Sure. Which leaves a gal to wonder why you're just sitting up here letting me find you."

"Hello, Gilda," the mare's voice replied, sounding tired.

"Sorry it had to end this way, Dash."

"No you're not. Not really."

"Naw. Not really."

"…"

"Gilda… can I make one request?"

"What?"

"Can we sing it? One more time?"

"Huh? Sing what…? oh you can't be serious."

"Just once?"

The second voice let out a long-suffering sigh. *"Ugh. Why?"*

"Because, just for a moment, I want to remember an earlier, happier time. A time when the world didn't suck."

"Fine. …Only for you, Dash." The voice paused. *"One final time. But after that, you know I'm going to kill you."*

"You'll try."

The two voices blended into an odd harmony:

"Junior Speedsters are our lives. Sky-bound soars and dare…"

The audio recording abruptly cut off; the machine had reached its limit.

Footnote: Level Up.

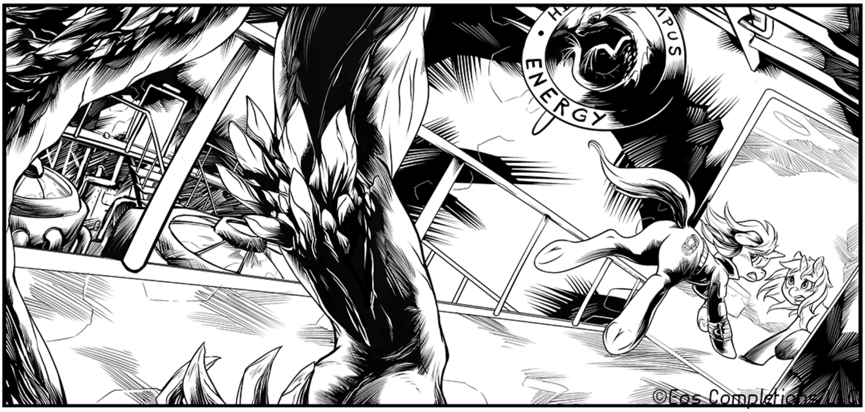
New Perk: The Magic of Friendship – When your HP or the HP of any member of your party drops below 30%, all members of your party (including yourself) gain much greater resistance to damage.

VOLUME THREE

GENEROUS SOULS

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Earth Pony Way



"I pray for the safety of all good ponies who come to Fillydelphia, even slaves. But we can't expect the Goddess to do all the work."

Industry.

Spike had said he didn't understand the "Earth Pony Way" until he had seen Fillydelphia. Even now, with the ruins of the city looming on the edge of the horizon, I began to understand why.

Industry had been the secret heart of Equestria since long before the war. How could you have pony-pulled trains without steel mills creating metal for the rails? How could you have the tall skyscrapers of Manehattan without glass companies producing windows by the hundreds? How could a small town like Ponyville have a dressmaker's shop with all the finest fabrics without the textiles industry? Still, most ponies had barely thought about it – out of sight, out of mind. Living in the idyllic, pastoral towns and halcyon cities of Equestria, it had been easy to forget. Unless you were a pony living in Equestria's single center of manufacturing – a mecca of earth pony industry.

Fillydelphia.

I learned these things from SteelHooves. I had sought his knowledge when it became abundantly clear that we were heading towards something far more than just a really big version of old Appleloosa. Because less than halfway between Manehattan and Fillydelphia, my PipBuck had started picking up a broadcast out of Fillydelphia.

It was the same musical programming the sprite-bots kept playing, interrupted occasionally for messages from Red Eye. But now that I had a constant feed, I realized those little speeches were far more frequent, and carried more substance, than I had assumed. Now, Red Eye was able to talk to me as he did the ponies of Fillydelphia. And his words worried me. A lot.

> *"…we have Uncle and Aunt Fruitcup, a peaceful and loving couple, married for nearly a decade now, living in their quaint little house with their tiny garden on the outskirts of Roamer. No children, two dogs and a sunflower that Aunt Fruitcup has named Celestia.*
>
> *"What kind of monster, I have been asked, would root up Aunt and Uncle Fruitcup, tear them away from their peaceful, pointless lives, and set them to work hauling carts heavy with scrap metal?*
>
> *"A monster, indeed. But one with his eyes open and cast upon our future. The future of Equestria. Two hundred years ago, we lost our great nation, but we will have it again! And what would the Fruitcups and their little homestead be in two hundred years? Nothing, meaningless, not even hoofnotes in the annals of history. But… what will have meaning two hundred years from now? This factory!*
>
> *"And it is from this factory, and the others like it, that Equestria will be rebuilt. It is from the work that Uncle and Aunt Fruitcup do now that a new national infrastructure will be created and a new golden age will be born – the golden age of Unity! Equestria will rise like a phoenix from her own ashes! But not without our help, and not without our labor.*
>
> *"**This** is what is important. **This** will make a difference. **This** will last!"*

The words of Red Eye were met by the clopping applause of at least a hundred hoofs. The roar of the crowd was abruptly cut off, replaced by a gravelly voice:

> *"And there you have it: Red Eye's speech marking the reopening ceremony of the Honest Steel factory. Word has it, Red Eye will be making a return visit later this week to inspect the factory's output. And now, for some music, starting with my favorite: March of the Parasprites… "*

The broadcast began playing the familiar marching music, heavy on tuba and harmonica.

I turned off the station, pulling out my earbloom. Red Eye, it would seem, didn't live in Fillydelphia. But he made visits, and one was coming up very soon. I informed my companions of this.

Velvet Remedy was curled up on one of the bench seats of the Sky Bandit with Pyrelight sleeping next to her, a glowing patch of emerald and gold against her charcoal coat. I was amazed at how the balefire phoenix had stayed with her. Normally, even a pet bird would need a cage.

SteelHooves nodded, not turning towards me. He had been keeping watch on the ground sweeping below ever since we had flown over the last rubble of the Manehattan suburbs. I tried to avoid doing that.

"Ah have bad news, folks," Calamity called from in front of the *Sky Bandit*. "She's startin' t' sag. Keep yer peepers out for someplace t' put 'er down long enough t' swap out the spark batteries."

"All I've got is dirt, rocks and dead trees," SteelHooves called back. "Nothing you want to land on out here."

I floated out the binoculars and moved to the edge of one of the windows, braving the possible vertigo. "What are we looking for?"

SteelHooves continued to scan the ground below. “Anyplace the hellhounds are less likely to get at us.”

Hellhounds. I recalled Homage, as DJ Pon3, warning ponies about hellhounds in the stretch between Manehattan and Fillydelphia. I’d been picturing rabid dogs, like the ones Uncle and Aunt Fruitcup had, only vicious. Possibly overgrown and mutated, like the bloodwings. Sure, the first time I heard of a hellhound, I learned that just one could take out a wagon train of slavers. But then, so could I. And I was hardly frightening.

SteelHooves’s even voice, however, betrayed a hint of worry. And nothing my mind had been conjuring would even strike alarm in the ancient, steel-clad soldier. “What are hellhounds?” I caught a shiver pass through Pyrelight. I suspected the answer would be something much worse than I dismissed them to be. When even the nigh-immortal bird is worried…

The suspicion was nailed home when SteelHooves and Calamity both turned to look at me as if I had just asked what a gun was.

“You don’t know what a hellhound is?” SteelHooves asked evenly. “And you decided we should all go to Fillydelphia anyway? Without finding out what lies between?”

Velvet Remedy chimed in, “I’ve never even heard of a hellhound.”

SteelHooves facehoofed with a clank of metal on metal. Calamity muttered something about “Stable folk” from ahead.

“You could fill us in,” Velvet Remedy suggested. “Or you two can just keep being melodramatic.”

SteelHooves bristled. “The hellhounds,” he nickered, “Are simply the most dangerous creatures in the Equestrian Wasteland. I’d rather face off against alicorns.”

Velvet Remedy and I exchanged looks. She deadpanned, “Wow. Informative. What, are these things a secret?” I smirked.

Calamity pushed back his hat, glancing over his left wing at us. “Either of ya folks ever heard ’bout Splendid Valley?”

My “Yes” came simultaneously with Velvet Remedy’s “No.” While hellhounds had not struck much of a note in my imagination, a terrifying specter of Splendid Valley had been painted in my mind by all the dark rumors and foreboding mentions of the place. I looked down over the ruined plains below us, all brown dirt and blackened trees. It didn’t look like the barren landscape in the picture in Twilight’s Athenaeum, but that had been before the end of the world. It could be…

“Is that what’s between Manehattan and Fillydelphia? Splendid Valley? Are we over it right now?” I scanned for what could be Maripony. A structure in the distance caught my eye. A large building topped with smokestacks. It looked fairly intact. Giant metal skeletons fanned out from the building in all directions, holding up lines of cable.

Calamity barked a laugh. “Aw hell no. Splendid Valley’s closer t’ Ponyville than t’ Fillydelphia.” I was suddenly thankful for the slavers who captured me my first night out of the Stable. Without them, what pony could say the direction I would have struck off in? “But… what all do y’know ’bout Splendid Valley?”

“Well… that’s where Maripony is,” I started, trying to remember everything I had heard, all while wondering where Calamity was leading with this. SteelHooves was silent, which could mean he thought that Calamity was taking the right tack. (Or just that SteelHooves was SteelHooves.) “Maripony used to be there because of all the gemstones they mined out of Splendid Valley, but it was converted to something else once the gems were all gone." I licked my lips, trying to think of more. "They stored all sorts of magical toxins in the caves under Splendid Valley. And it was the second place hit by a megaspell…"

"Second place, huh?" Calamity whinnied. "Ah didn't know that."

"You're missing the most important thing," SteelHooves interrupted.

More important than megaspells, radiation and magical toxins? I looked from Calamity to SteelHooves.

"Ayep. When the ponies decided t' mine Splendid Valley, they had had one small problem. The valley was inhabited…"

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened. "Wait… they mined ponies' *homes?"*

"Not ponies," SteelHooves answered, interjecting, "Gemstones meant magical energy weapons. Crucial for the war effort. It was decided that the creatures living in Splendid Valley had to move. The valley belonged to the nation of Equestria, and it was needed."

I felt a rock growing in my stomach.

"Only, not alla the inhabitants seemed t' get the message. An' after ponies had stripped the place clean, several families moved back into those caverns."

"Back in… to where the Ministry of Arcane Sciences was storing hazardous magical waste?"

"And to where the zebras set off a balefire bomb," SteelHooves added.

"Goddesses," Velvet Remedy gasped. "And they… survived? Those poor… what were they again?"

"Diamond dogs," Calamity called back.

I froze. Waaaaait… "Hold on! Are you telling us that the creatures that Rarity *defeated by whining* have become the most terrifying monsters in the Equestrian Wasteland?"

"Ayep."

I looked to SteelHooves in disbelief, but his helmet nodded. "They're big. They're fast. And they're *extremely* aggressive. They have claws that can tear through armor like it was soft cloth. I've even seen one claw their way through an alicorn's magical shield."

Fuck. "Well, makes me glad we're up here where we can shoot at them and they can't get at us!" I paused, "They can't fly, can they?"

"Nope," Calamity said, much to my short-lived relief. "But they c'n dig. Fast. An' pretty much through anything. When they come after ya, they c'n stay underground 'till they're right beneath ya. Ground might tremble a bit; that's all the warnin' y'all will get before they rend ya apart. An' they sure ain't gonna stand around outside where ya c'n shoot at 'em."

"Worse," SteelHooves asserted. "They're smart. These aren't animals like manticores or bloodwings. They've gotten hold of magical energy weapons, reverse-engineered them, and rebuilt them for holding in their claws. They don't have the magic to create new ones, but they sliced their way into the Splendid Valley Armory and stole over a hundred weapons – all of which, we must assume, have been re-purposed."

"So…" Velvet Remedy said slowly, "They can shoot us, and we can't get at them."

Cocking her head towards me, she snarked, "Well thank you, Littlepip. I adore the places you take me."

“What is this place?” I asked, staring at the huge smokestacks as I stepped out of the *Sky Bandit* and onto the broken roof of the building that I had spotted in the distance. All around, metal structures, like the skeletons of standing giants, stretched out across the plains, most marching towards Manehattan or Fillydelphia.

The building was huge, and offered the best protection against hellhounds.

“A power station,” SteelHooves answered. “Massive furnaces burned coal to generate the power necessary to operate a lot of the non-magical conveniences that came out of Equestria’s technological revolution. There were hundreds of these all over Equestria before the war.” He pointed a hoof to the cables that the metal skeletons were holding up. “Those carried the power created here to the cities.”

Wow. I floated out the binoculars and gazed out along one of the marching lines of metal structures. About a mile away, several had collapsed, the lines severed and dangling from their still-standing compatriots. This was so much bigger than the once coal-powered train engines I had seen in New Appleloosa and Junction R-7.

Calamity had detached himself from the *Sky Bandit’s* harness and was preparing to crawl under the passenger wagon as Velvet Remedy fished spare spark batteries out of her saddleboxes.

Floating my binoculars back into my saddlebags, I cast a look about the roof. On one end was small tower with a door. My curiosity woke up and began digging into my mind with a persistent hoof. Shrugging, I trotted towards the door, pulling out my screwdriver and a bobby pin in anticipation. No reason not to just take a look.

I was thrilled when the door was locked. Crouching, I got to work.

Click. Such a sweet sound. I nudged the door open. Stairs, up to the tower and down into the power plant itself.

As I stepped into the darkness, a deep, rumbling voice asked, “Where are you going?”

“Exploring,” I smiled back. SteelHooves just shook his head, but took up position behind me as I headed up the stairs.

The tower stairwell opened onto a single room with a balcony that looked like it was designed for pegasus wagon landings. The back half of the room was nothing more than a huge cargo elevator. A circular company logo painted on the elevator door (Hippocampus Energy: Hydroelectric, Coal, Sewage) was flaked and peeling into slow oblivion.

The rest of the room had large windows looking out towards the Fillydelphia and Manehattan skylines. Both were far enough away that the horizon hid them, but Fillydelphia was closer and I could see the clouds on that horizon hung low: black, angry clouds lit by reddish light from below. Fillydelphia’s ivory tower was clearly visible, slashing up into the clouds like a needle.

“Wow. The sky over Fillydelphia actually looks… kinda evil.”

“Red Eye must have several of the factories going again,” SteelHooves commented.

I nodded although I had no idea why that would change the cloud cover. Then again, I thought as I looked out across the power plant’s massive chimneys, maybe it would.

There were four boxes of ammo sitting under a bank of dead lights with labels like “generator #11 output” and “sector #7 load”. I knelt by the ammo boxes. Two were empty, the other two locked. I opened one easily enough, retrieving ammo that didn't match any firearm I had seen before. A big and frightening caliber. The other box, to my surprise, was jammed. Somepony had tried picking the lock and failed badly. It was literally the first evidence I had seen that anypony in the Equestrian Wasteland other than me had learned lockpicking. Unfortunately for both of us, this pony wasn't very good at it.

I sat back. I had no idea how to open a force-jammed lock, aside from the sort of massive firepower that would likely destroy the contents of the armored box. The damn thing was designed so you couldn't just shoot the lock.

I telekinetically lifted the box and tried to pry at it, but that was utterly futile. A pony might think that having the strength to lift a train car would give me more than enough power to tear open a box, but no. The levitation field of my telekinesis makes the objects trapped inside, like the boxcar in Appleloosa, virtually weightless… until, of course, I let it go. There simply wasn't enough force behind my single magical spell to break a lock. I'd have better luck with a crowbar. But I tried anyway. And failed. And tried again. And failed again. And finally tossed the box as hard as I could. It hit with a thud that did no further damage to the box but left a small crack in the plaster covering the wall.

"Done now?" a smooth, feminine voice asked from the stairwell. "Or would you like to jump on it with your hooves for a while first?"

I blushed, looking at Velvet Remedy. "um… How's Calamity doing?"

She sighed, looking out the window at the Sky Bandit on the roof below. "Do you think there's any chance of getting him a bath in Fillydelphia?" She looked across at SteelHooves. "I suspect an actual spa is right out."

I laughed. Good luck trying to get Calamity into a spa even if there is one!

* * *

The stairwell down lead to a set of offices adjacent to a break room. While SteelHooves and I took the offices, Velvet Remedy trotted towards the latter to scavenge any foodstuffs from what had once been the employee refrigerator. I felt confident that everything she would *find* would be vegetarian, no matter the actual contents.

The offices had windows on opposite sides. To the back, the windows had once peered outside, but they had been so caked with dust over the centuries that the weakened sunlight that made it through the clouds above was not strong enough to penetrate.

Opposite these were windows that stared out over the power plant's main floor, filled with enormous generators and a wall of furnaces. A metal catwalk bisected the air above, leading from the offices here to what looked like an Overmare's office on the far side.

"How did catwalks over heavy machinery become the dominant aesthetic?"

Horrifying memories of Ironshod Firearms were flashing through my head. Although, fortunately, this place seemed utterly deserted. Looking around, I could see where there had been turret emplacements, but they were destroyed. Further catwalks and suspended stairwells lead down to the floor of the plant, and on one was the crumbled remains of a brainbot and a few piles of mildly-pink ash. Further evidence of the scavengers who had come before us.

I turned back, already having decided to cross the catwalk and explore the office beyond. But not with SteelHooves. Previous experience told me that having someone as heavy as he was on those catwalks would be four hooves of "no".

SteelHooves was looking at a framed sheet high up on another wall. A badly faded page from a newspaper stared back. I trotted over, having to plant my forehooves on the wall to get the height to read it. The pony who hung the frame was not thinking of shorter ponies.

The main article featured a picture of this power plant (or, at least, one that could be its identical sister):

Hippocampus Energy Plant #12 Opens Amidst Controversy
Pegasus and Unicorn Protestors Decry Environmental Impact

The story dominated the page, pushing aside lesser stories *("Fillydelphia's prestigious Alpha-Omega Hotel to host this year's Summer Sun Celebration"* and *"Coal prices continue to rise as relations with zebra nation remain strained. Princess Celestia promises amiable resolution soon")* to make room.

A thought hit me. Back in New Appleloosa, Calamity had said something…

All the coal's in strange far-away lands… full of zebras!

I dropped to all hooves, turning my head towards SteelHooves.

"Hold on," I said, feeling dumbstruck for the second time in as many hours. "Equestria didn't have any coal!" I waved a hoof at the power plant. "Are you telling me you ponies built Equestria's entire infrastructure on a power source *you didn't have?"*

SteelHooves said nothing.

"That's… insane! What pony does that?"

SteelHooves just stared as I had a mental meltdown trying to parse that idea. Finally, he stated, "Why would it be a problem? We had resources the zebras needed, they had coal. We trade. Everybody's happy."

Yeah, sure. Until somepony… or some zebra… figures out they don't have enough to go around anymore. Or decides they just don't want to share.

I turned away, my eyes falling on a desk and the strangely pristine coffee mug still sitting on it. I allowed myself the distraction of marveling at how, in all these dusty, tattered, decaying ruins, a coffee mug would be the thing in finest condition. I glanced across at the other desks and a table beyond. Yes, there wasn't one that I wouldn't have felt safe drinking out of… except for the one where a baby radroach had apparently decided to drown itself. I shuddered a little, and decided that the coffee mug maker had employed some minor magic in their creation. A little spell meant to keep them from being stained by the coffee had left them the cleanest things in all of Equestria.

Several of the mugs had the company emblem: Hippocampus Energy. Hydroelectric, Coal, Sewage. Okay, so Equestria hadn't been *entirely* dependent on trade with the zebras, but this power plant spoke volumes to just how much of it had been.

I snorted in wry amusement. Unicorns gave us power through magic. Earth ponies had given us power through water, rocks and… "oh horseapples!" I said, suddenly realizing we had all left Calamity on the rooftop alone.

* * *

We all galloped back only to find Calamity still at work. "Shouldn't be more'n a few minutes," he said, half his body hidden under the *Sky Bandit.* "Why…? What's got all y'all actin' spooked?"

Pyrelight was circling overhead, keeping an eye out for danger. (Or food. Or small, shiny things.)

"Nothing," SteelHooves started to reply, but Velvet Remedy stepped forward, levitating a rolled sheet of paper that she had slipped through the straps of her saddleboxes.

"I found something I wanted you to take a look at," Velvet almost purred. "Building and fixing things is your forte, after all."

Calamity pushed himself out from under the Sky Bandit to take a look. Velvet Remedy cringed back slightly. He was as filthy as she had feared. "Sure. Whatcha' got fer me?"

Taking a few steps back from Calamity, Velvet floated the roll of paper between them, uncurling the schematic. The paper was darkly stained with blood, but most of the writing was still legible. Calamity leaned forward to study it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Pyrelight dive down below the roofline. A moment later, there was a crackle of green flame. The majestic predator returned with a roasted squirrel in her beak. She dropped it on the roof next to Velvet Remedy and began pecking at it. I boggled internally as Velvet, who not minutes ago had edged back from a dirt and grease-smeared Calamity, only smiled at the very carnivorous actions of the balefire phoenix.

Calamity let out a low whistle. "Well, *somepony* was sure… inventive." He looked up to Velvet Remedy. "Where'd y'all find this?"

"On a table, beneath the remains of a dead unicorn pony," Velvet Remedy fretted. I could guess by the waver in her voice that the body had not been a skeleton. Somepony more recent, one of the scavengers I assumed. "I think she may have died for that."

"How did she die?" Calamity asked with an odd sense of urgency.

Velvet Remedy, ever the medical pony, was swift to answer. "She was hit by a magical weapon. It didn't turn her to ash, but it melted half of her face and neck," she said grimly.

Calamity nodded with a frown. "Well, that rules out… 'bout nothing."

"The power plant had robotic security that wielded magical energy weapons," I informed him. "I've seen the sort before."

Calamity let out a sigh of relief. Pyrelight looked up from her meal, a strip of barbecued squirrel dangling from her beak.

"This here's a design fer creatin' a helmet usin' the claws of a hellhound. Thing is, Ah don't think a unicorn could use it," he told us. I could imagine why; I had no desire to trade in my horn for such a helmet. "But it would sure make one hell of a weapon if Ah ever gave up shootin' for headbuttin'."

* * *

"One of the children asked me, 'Red Eye, what is your cutie mark?'"

The charismatic voice of Red Eye spoke to me in my earbloom as I moved back down into the power plant. This time, I left SteelHooves behind with Calamity. In return, Velvet Remedy insisted on accompanying me. No splitting up.

"To that child, I answered 'I do not have one.'"

I paused, lifting a hoof to my earbloom. I recalled with a shudder how the alicorns were blank-flanked. Was Red Eye an alicorn? He certainly didn't speak like one. I racked my brain, trying to remember if I'd ever encountered a male alicorn. I couldn't think of one.

> *"Of course, the next question was 'Why, Red Eye?' Why don't I have a cutie mark? Because I choose not to have a cutie mark. Why would I want one? Am I really going to let a picture on my flank determine my future? If I find something that I really enjoy, do I need an icon on my ass to tell me? Of course not.*
>
> *"To too many ponies, cutie marks are more about what you can't be. How can you expect to be a great scientist if your cutie mark is a rake? Or an amazing artist if your flank has a picture of a pile of hay? Who is going to give you the chance?*
>
> *"But if your flank is bare, then the possibilities are endless. And the choice is up to you. That is why I had my cutie mark removed. And why the Children of Unity have all chosen to do the same. In the new Equestria, we will all be lifted up by the Goddess, freed from the shackles of cutie mark coercion.*
>
> *"But there is still much work to be done before that day. So in anticipation for it, we have chosen to take the first step ourselves."*

As I took my first step onto the catwalk, I shut off the broadcast. I didn't need any of that nonsense threatening my concentration if a section of the walkway started to give.

"Velvet, you stay here. I'm just going to go across to that office…"

"Because that's what 'not splitting up' means to you, right?" Velvet chided.

I sighed and tapped at the catwalk. "Because I don't want to risk putting extra weight…" I clammed up two words too late.

"So… you're saying I'm heavy?" Velvet Remedy said with a voice like chocolate silk. "Is that why you no longer seem attracted to me? And here I had thought it was because of the… wagon. But no, it's because you think I'm fat."

I facehoofed. "Velvet… I…"

"Oh no," she said, putting an extra sway into her hips as she stepped out onto the catwalk in front of me. "It's good that you've finally told me. All this adventuring… I've really let myself go, haven't I?"

"Velvet…"

The more mature unicorn mare tossed her mane as she turned to look at me over her shoulder, pouting alluringly. I felt a flush of arousal mix with cringing shame. She lifted a hoof to her muzzle, suckling it in thought. "I suppose I'm getting old too."

Luna's tidal mareheat!

I began to follow behind her, head hung low, using my levitation to keep most of my own weight off the catwalk. She tortured me the whole trip. It was the longest catwalk in history.

* * *

I was working the lock on the door to what I had mentally labeled the power plant's

"Overmare's office" when Velvet Remedy bit my armored utility barding and gave a tug. My mind immediately conjured two possibilities. Either something was wrong, the sort of wrong that required *silent* notification, or Velvet Remedy had decided to ramp up my punishment with nuzzles and nips. Either, really, seemed just as likely.

I heard a shuffling noise below.

Okay, not a punishment. Carefully, I set down my tools, not wanting to risk a shock making me drop them. I peeked over the edge of the catwalk. Below us, hidden behind the last of the massive generators, was the shredded body of a Steel Ranger. Gasping in horror, I almost called out SteelHooves' name. But this wasn't SteelHooves. The armor had subtle differences to the design which told me this Ranger had been a mare. Lumbering over the corpse was a hulking, demonic creature, canine only in the broadest comparison, three times the size of the armored pony whom it was tearing to ribbons with deadly claws that sliced through the armor like it was paper mache.

The hellhound stopped, sniffing at the air. It raised itself up to full height, then let out a pained howl, dropping back to all fours again. One of the creature's legs was crippled and deformed. The Steel Ranger had gotten in one good hit before falling to the monster.

The monster reached over and picked up a bizarrely designed magical energy rifle from the floor. Again, it began to look around. Velvet Remedy crouched flat against the catwalk. I shied away from the edge. We held our breaths.

We heard a grunt. Then a whimper and shuffling. It was moving… but to where?

I carefully lifted the screwdriver and bobby pin again, hoping that this office offered a back way out. I didn't want to crawl back across the long catwalk. If it could smell us, I wanted out of this room quickly.

The tumblers fell into place. The door opened with a click that felt deafening.

We both heard an odd vocal sound from somewhere below.

We both rushed into the room as quietly as we could and I gently pushed the door closed behind us. But it was too late. I could see the monster climbing up one of the sets of stairs like a monkey – if that monkey were made out of death.

I looked immediately to the wall where the elevator had been in Ironshod Firearms. No such luck. I took in the room quickly – desk, terminal, wall, weapons cabinet (a weapons cabinet in a power plant?), filing cabinet, office fridge, miscellaneous badly decayed furniture. No other exit at all.

I figured it would take the hellhound all of seconds to claw through the door. It would take longer, with its bad leg, to get across the catwalk.

Velvet Remedy galloped to the far corner, horn beginning to glow. Dammit… if these things could claw through an alicorn's shield, what good would Velvet's do?

I floated out Little Macintosh and my sniper rifle, although I would have only the slimmest chance to get a shot off with the latter before the monster closed the distance and killed me.

We waited.

As the seconds dragged on, I started counting the missed opportunities to swap out ammunition for something with more punch. But as much as I yearned to do so, I was certain that the moment I emptied Little Macintosh would be the moment the hellhound came through the door.

Velvet Remedy was trembling, tensely holding her spell. She was shooting me furtive looks that I couldn't interpret, but didn't dare even whisper.

We waited several more seconds. By my estimation, the hellhound should have already reached the door. Was it just sitting outside? Or had it gone away? I forced myself to think through the clouding effect of fear. SteelHooves said these things were *smart.* It could be planning. But what would it be planning? What would I plan if I was an incarnation of death? A wounded one?

What I *wouldn't* do is charge in through a door where the ponies on the other side were waiting to shoot me. No, I'd set a trap.

It was setting a trap!

My mind had snatched that idea when Velvet whispered one of her own. "It tracks by scent," she hissed. "What if it went the wrong way?"

I didn't think that was likely. It must have heard me shut the door behind us. But, if Velvet Remedy was right, then that meant it was heading up towards SteelHooves and Calamity! And we were wasting precious seconds that we didn't have!

Of course, if I was right, rushing out to save them would be exactly the trap-springing mistake it was looking for.

* * *

Cautiously, I inched towards the door. I was nearly to it when I heard a sound from somewhere on the other side, faint and brief and unfathomable.

I jumped, backpedaling until my tail hit the far wall. I crouched, cowering, and readied my weapons to shoot. All of them.

* * *

With a sense of utter dread, I grew tired of waiting. My nerves were frazzled from adrenaline. The room's musty, dilapidated odor was giving me a headache. I thought I had heard the strange sound a few more times, but it was so faint through the door that it could have just as easily been the whispers of my mind playing tricks on me.

By now, if the monster had gone after SteelHooves and Calamity, they were already dead. If it was stalking us, it was clearly willing to wait forever.

"Fine," I hissed. "I'm going to find out what we're going to die for, and then I'm leaving. Slow and careful. I'm expecting a trap."

Velvet Remedy nodded. "Just keep out of the hellhound's way. I've got a plan."

Velvet Remedy had a plan? *Velvet?* I quickly chided myself for being so surprised. She was smart and capable, if not exactly what I considered Wasteland-wise. And besides, it was bound to happen sooner or later.

I started with the weapon's locker, only to find that, like the ammo box upstairs, the lock had been mangled by an amateurish lockpicking attempt. I felt a flare of hatred. SteelHooves and Calamity might be dead, we might be about to die, and this idiot had fucked up the lock.

I moved on to the desk only to find it had been unlocked and emptied. The filing cabinet had been unlocked as well, but inside I found mostly ashes, with the burnt remains of documents and folders as well a partially-melted audio recorder with no recording remaining. My rival lockpicker had opened this filing cabinet with the intent to destroy the contents, not loot them.

I turned to the terminal. Hacking it was hard, but not as hard as Pinkie Pie's terminal. But either my rival had gotten into it before me, or the terminal's spell matrix had been programmed to wipe out all the contents. The terminal was blank.

That left the wall safe, which I had purposefully left for last. Looking it over, I had to bite back a whistle at the craftsmanship. The lock was, by far, the most complicated and demanding I had ever attempted. Not to mention the sturdiest. My rival had clearly tried and failed here too, but the lock resisted even jamming. The bitch had responded by breaking off a bobby pin in a mean attempt to prevent me from getting the prize it had denied her. I pulled it out with simple telekinesis.

My first attempt failed. As did my second. I I thought I had it the third time, but was only rewarded with a broken bobby pin.

Dammit! I wasn't sure if, without the benefits of Party-Time Mint-als, I could manage it.

No. I wasn't going down that path. Not again.

Instead, I pulled out every lockpicking tool I had at my disposal and tried again. And again. And again, until I finally got it right.

The safe clicked open.

Inside was a fair amount of pre-war gold coins, two clips of those very scary bullets, a StealthBuck and a memory orb. And a golden "Iron Pony" saddle buckle. (If it's an *Iron* Pony buckle, why is it colored *gold?)* That last I left behind.

Motioning Velvet Remedy behind the desk, I crouched down and focused on the door. A telekinetic field enveloped the door, depressing the handle with a click and pulling it open.

The first thing I saw was the hellhound crouched at the far end of the walkway, holding its rifle as it tracked a target I couldn't see. The first thing I heard was the symphony of beeps as the magical energy mines that the hellhound had attached to the door prepared to detonate.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

My instinct was to slam the door shut, but even if the backlash didn't kill us, the explosion would destroy the bridge. Instead, I grasped them each with my telekinesis and shot a prayer to the Goddesses that the actual strength of my spell was enough to pry them off the door.

The hellhound turned and fired a beam of orange light at me. It struck inside the open wall safe, scorching the back. The energy splash turned the Iron Pony buckle brightly hot.

The damn mines wouldn't budge. The hellhound might as well have attached them with wonderglue. (And, in retrospect, probably did.)

BEEP!BEEP!BEEP!

There was no more time. I slammed the door shut and ducked.

The explosion melted the wall.

It also turned enough of the floor to goo that the desk fell into the room below us. Without thinking about it, Velvet and I leapt down after it. The last thing I thought I saw before I plunged into the darkness below was Pyrelight soaring across the wide open space above the generators, the hellhound trying to track her with its rifle. The last thing I heard was the rending sound of metal.

* * *

Pain lanced up my left foreleg with every step. Considering what we had momentarily escaped, I was happy for it. I had merely twisted my hoof. I still had all my limbs attached.

The hallway lead past bathrooms on one side and what I suspected was the supervisors' break room, complete with vending machines. The opposite side of the hallway bore a set of three framed and backlit posters, each with a different illustration but the same proclamation in big, bold letters:

PROGRESS.

The highly stylized images were, in order: a train engine bellowing smoke and hauling multiple passenger cars all by itself, ponies staring up in marvel at a monorail train passing overhead, and a mare marveling in near orgasmic glee as her spider-like hover robot dusted her furniture. The last poster's backlighting was flickering maddeningly.

We found two more slashed apart Steel Rangers before we made it to the stairwell. To my dismay, the only way out was back into the generator room. Velvet Remedy whispered to me, "When I say the word, gallop for all you're worth."

A shot of fear went through my breast. "I don't know how much run I can manage right now," I said, but my real fear was that her plan was self-endangering.

"Try self-levitating just enough that you aren't putting any real weight on your hurt hoof," she recommended. "And don't worry. I know that look. I'll be right behind you. Promise."

Honesty, a pony in my head reminded me, was not Velvet Remedy's virtue. "You better be. Or I'm coming back."

She nodded. I had Little Macintosh in front of me, now loaded with magically-enhanced bullets. I took a breath.

We stepped cautiously out onto the main floor of Hippocampus Energy Plant #12. We were able to spot the injured hellhound almost immediately. It was perched on top of a generator, shooting at Pyrelight, who in turn was twirling and dancing in the air, occasionally sending puffs of green flame in the monster's direction.

Pyrelight was distracting it for us. Belatedly, I realized those odd sounds I had been hearing were shots from the magical energy rifle, muffled by the door.

Notes to self: First, Pyrelight is willing to risk herself for Velvet Remedy (and possibly me as well). Second, Pyrelight is an amazingly agile flyer. Third, hellhounds may be fifty different flavors of murder, but they aren't necessarily good shots.

The hellhound took less than a second to notice our presence, leaping savagely at us, bloodthirsty claws outstretched. It gave a slight yelp as its ruined leg hit the floor, but its good leg pushed it towards us with a speed that caught me off guard. I froze, forgetting to fire.

The light around Velvet Remedy's horn pulled away, becoming a ball of light that soared towards the hellhound, striking it in the shoulder. The monster seemed to instantly lose all coordination, collapsing in a jumble of limbs, skidding towards us on the floor out of sheer momentum.

"Go!" Velvet Remedy yelled as she started galloping, giving the monster a wide birth as she made for the far end, leaping over bits of the catwalk which had collapsed into the room. I followed, taking her suggestion. The pain still slowed me, but it was manageable. The hellhound slashed out at me with those huge, terrible claws. I darted deftly out of the way. It tried to crawl after me, managing only a wicked slither. The hellhound had fallen and couldn't seem to get up.

Ahead of me, Velvet Remedy stopped and motioned me to continue ahead. I worried but didn't argue. As I reached the opposite stairwell, I heard her calling out to Pyrelight behind me.

* * *

"Did you kill it?" I asked, panting hard as Pyrelight swooped into the *Sky Bandit* through a shattered window, Velvet Remedy galloping up just a pace behind.

The charcoal-coated unicorn tossed herself into the passenger wagon.

I'd arrived just enough ahead of them to yell warning to SteelHooves and Calamity while gulping for breath. (I think what I said amounted to "Aaaah! Hellhound… generators… rifle… Velvet… spell… Go! Go! GO!") Calamity had barely gotten the harness attached when Velvet had dashed out onto the roof.

Calamity spread his wings and with a firm beat, pulled us off the roof and into the air.

Velvet Remedy cocked her head to me, even as she caught her own breath. "Killed it? Why ever would I do that? I'm not in the habit of killing my patients."

Blink. "Itwasawhatnow?"

"Anesthetic spell," she smiled. "The poor thing was clearly in pain."

I stared at Velvet like she had completely spit her bit.

"Plus, it does have the very helpful side effect of preventing the patient from running around. Very hard to do when you can't feel your legs." She smiled cleverly, her eyes twinkling.

I fell to my haunches.

Damn. That plan… damn.

Recovering a little. "You didn't… actually heal it, did you?"

Velvet rolled her eyes. I took that as a no. Personally, I would have killed it if I had realized it was virtually helpless. But in a way I was happy that Velvet had not. I had been worried that the wasteland was robbing her of that compassion which made her so special. It had eroded her spirit, there was no getting away from that. But it was good to see that my Velvet Remedy (in a "my Pinkie Pie" sense) was still there.

Even if, contemplating those three Steel Rangers, I really disagreed with this particular decision.

"When did you learn to do that?" I asked, amazed.

Velvet tossed her mane and smiled. “Back in Tenpony Tower while you were… out. Doctor Helpinghoof had quite a nice selection of old Ministry of Peace medical spells for sale.” Velvet Remedy smiled wistfully. “Apparently, Fluttershy’s Ministry had a whole department of unicorn ponies dedicated to magical research.”

The pony in my head perked with alarm, but was ignored. “You can *buy* spells?”

Velvet Remedy nickered. “If by that you mean barter for tutelage, then yes.”

“But… Doctor Helpinghoof was an earth pony?”

“Yes,” Velvet patronized. “But his assistant was a nice unicorn buck. Anyway, don’t feel too bad. I doubt you’ve missed out on anything. All the teaching in the world won’t help if you don’t have a natural talent for the type of spell you are trying to learn. I’ll never be able to cast lightning from my horn, or turn a rock into a top hat, or conjure a door out of thin air. Not matter how many bottle caps I try to spend or hours I try to learn. Entertainment and medical spells are my gift.”

I tried not to visibly droop. “Yeah. And mine is to do the same spell every single other unicorn can do. The first one we learn. And that’s it.” It was like having a PipBuck as a cutie mark. The epitome of non-special.

“No,” Velvet’s voice chided. “Your gift is to do that spell better than anypony else in at least two hundred years.”

I gave her a weak but thankful smile. That did make it sound better.

* * *

“Sorry ’bout this,” Calamity said as he hung from the harness, wings drooping. The entire *Sky Bandit* was wrapped in the soft light of my levitation spell, glowing against the darkened sky as I drifted us slowly towards a freestanding section of overpass three piers long. It looked plenty sturdy, and should be safe from hellhounds. A place to spend the night.

“No need to apologize,” I insisted. Calamity had been flying for hours on end with only the stop at the Hippocampus Energy Plant for a break. I envied the pegasus’ endurance.

“Muh get up an’ go.” Calamity bemoaned, “…just kinda got up an went.” He looked out towards the standing chunk of overpass. “Ya gonna make it that far?”

“No sweat.” Actually, much sweat. I was already beginning to feel the strain, and the overpass was at least half an hour away. I would have said there was no way I could hold us that long; but after all Calamity did, I’d be damned if I couldn’t find the fortitude to take us this tiny bit farther.

We moved across the sky with aching slowness.

“I still can’t believe…” I fretted, “I mean, the idea that you could barter for spells never even crossed my mind.” I let out a sigh. “I guess that explains why Velvet Remedy is our diplomat and master trader, and I’m…”

“A toaster repairpony?” Calamity supplied when I was at a loss for words. I laughed and nodded.

Pyrelight fluttered out and perched on the rust-coated pegasus’ battle saddle, clamping onto it with her claws. She spread her wings and flapped, as if with my magic in play she could hope to pull the *Sky Bandit* herself.

"Drat!" Calamity chuckled. "Pretty soon, y'all won't need me fer anything."

My eyes widened in alarm. "What? Don't say that!"

"Well, it ain't passed muh attention that Ah've been *not* with ya on yer adventures far more lately than Ah've been *with* ya."

I opened my mouth to tell him how not true that was… and stopped as the reality of the statement sank into me. Instead, "Calamity, you're my closest and dearest friend…" Not including Homage, I mentally added. "You keep me strong. You keep me from losing it. I will *always* need you."

"Sure, ya say that now."

"And next adventure, we'll go together. You and me. I promise."

The setting sun dipped below the cloud line, setting the clouds ablaze with brilliant oranges and dark crimsons. The effect was magnified against the black clouds that hung over Fillydelphia, turning the whole post-apocalyptic city into a fiery hell.

"Dayumn!"

There were dark spots floating around over the city. We were close enough to make them out, but just barely. Calamity had spotted them too, as he asked me to float him the binoculars. He scanned the air between the silhouetted ruins of Fillydelphia and conflagrant sky.

"Aw hell," he said, motioning for me to take a look myself. I floated the binoculars to my own eyes and stared towards Fillydelphia, seeing hundreds of molten fires in the black below. Chimneys poured out constant smoke. The draconic skeleton of a massive roller coaster added an alien touch to the city's skyline. The dark silhouette of the Fillydelphia town shot upwards into the sky. Following it with my gaze, I saw them…

Dozens of pink dirigibles, shaped like creepy pink smiley faces complete with ears and mane, floated around the sky above the city ruins. "Pinkie Pie balloons."

"There's a name fer 'em?" Calamity gave a shudder. "Anyway, Ah was more lookin' at what the ponies in those… Pinkie Pie balloons were packin'. We sure as hell ain't flyin' inta there."

I looked again, turning up the magnification as high as it would go. I saw earth ponies attending mounted rifles easily two ponies long, scoped and terrifying. They were what my sniper rifle would like to be when it was all grown up.

"Anti-machine rifles," Calamity informed me. I now had a very good idea what my scary new bullets were supposed to be for.

He was right. Taking the pegasus-pulled bomb anywhere near that skyline was a death sentence. From here on in, we walked. We'd be sneaking into Fillydelphia on hoof. I sincerely hoped we were out of hellhound territory.

* * *

> *"How did the much-deified Princess Celestia and Princess Luna allow our land to become like this? How did the mares of the Ministries allow the greatest and most glorious nation in the world to die in balefire and agony? The answer is quite simple.*
>
> *"Incompetence.*
>
> *"For generations, the hard-working ponies of Equestria toiled to build this great land, and the leaders sat back and reaped the benefits. And not only them, but a*

> *great majority of ponies throughout the land. They enjoyed the fruits of hard labor without lifting a hoof themselves. They lay back, slept on clouds, idled their days away like parasites feeding on the sweat of the workers. Workers like you. Workers like me.*
>
> *"They became selfish and lazy. And laziness, my little ponies, breeds stupidity.*
>
> *"The destruction they brought down on us was, in a word, inevitable. They couldn't do any better because they weren't any better. But today, we all work. And tomorrow, when our toil is done, we will step forward and be accepted into the loving embrace of the Goddess and be transformed. And in the coming Unity, we will all reap the rewards of our own brows. Together. As equals…"*

I shut off Red Eye's broadcast. Somehow, they always left me feeling twisted inside. He was unpleasantly convincing sometimes. A steady diet of this fodder and I might find myself biting his poisoned apple.

Calamity had collapsed from exhaustion the moment we touched down on the overpass and was snoring softly nearby. There were other vehicles up here, including a large Sunrise Sarsaparilla delivery wagon that had been heading towards Fillydelphia, a faded painting of a smiling Celestia watching over happy sarsaparilla drinkers adorning its side. A couple of camouflage-painted chariots were abandoned on the far edge – part of a military convoy, the rest of which was crushed and buried under the collapsed section of overpass beyond. I wanted to poke around, explore… but I'd promised Calamity. And while looking in the backs of a few wagons wasn't really an adventure, I was sure he'd be sore with me if I didn't wait for him. With good reason.

Velvet Remedy was asleep as well. Pyrelight perched on her shoulder, plumage seeming to glow in the dying light. The balefire phoenix looked proud and, if it wasn't my imagination, possessive.

SteelHooves was on guard again. I didn't think I'd ever seen him sleep. Did ghouls even need sleep? So much I didn't know.

"I like you," I said, smiling to the mythical bird. "You're…" The word that came to mind was simple, but after my mistake with Velvet Remedy earlier, I was watching my choice of vocabulary. "…straightforward. I don't have to worry about any hidden agendas or dark secrets with you. You watched us… dare I say out of curiosity? If so, it is something we have in common."

The balefire phoenix let out a pleasant whistle.

"Velvet Remedy helped you, and you decided to stay with her. Friendship, pure and uncomplicated."

The phoenix preened.

"You chose well," I added looking to Velvet Remedy. "She really is a very good, very special pony." I reached over and put a hoof on her flank, touching her cutie mark. A singing bird.

Pyrelight scowled, giving a hoot backed by a little burst of green flame. My PipBuck briefly click-clicked, then was quiet again. I drew back my hoof with a laugh. "Don't worry, I'm not a rival. She's all yours." A touch chagrined, I added, "Maybe once I would have been. But… things have changed."

The green and gold phoenix cocked her head. I found a way to explain. "Velvet put me in a cage. It was for my own good… I was sick and hurting myself. But after that…"

I paused. “We’re just good friends.”

Pyrelight seemed satisfied with that. But I wasn’t going to pet Velvet Remedy’s flank to find out.

* * *

I was having trouble sleeping. The fright earlier and the worries of what lay ahead merged into a constant buzz in my head. I couldn’t afford to go into this new situation half-stupid from lack of rest, but that worry only made it worse. I couldn’t force myself to sleep. I’d tried.

A distraction might help derail the worried thoughts swarming my head. I pulled out the memory orb from the power plant. I stared at it for a moment, running through a mental checklist. I wasn’t in battle or imminent danger, so it should be safe. On the other hoof, these orbs were always a gamble. I remembered the sickening experience of the damaged memory orb all too vividly.

Part of me also wondered if I was just using lack of sleep as an excuse to indulge my curiosity. I probably was. Well, that was okay. Who didn’t have their vices?

* * *

The memory held within it something amazing, wondrous, inspiring. Sunlight!

Pure, radiant sunlight. Unfiltered and unmolested by a cover of clouds. The ball of fire in the sky was at once terrifying and majestic. The living symbol of the Goddess Celestia herself. Its light was powerful, capable of slashing through darkness and shadows, revealing and cleansing. It was warm and compassionate, and it brought with it a sense of peace and hope.

Sunlight was as miraculous to me as a PipBuck was to the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland. And, likewise, it was as pedestrian to the pony I was riding as my PipBuck was to me.

I was standing on a balcony with several smartly-dressed gentlestallions, staring down into a huge sunlit foyer lined with clear windows of glass that rose at least three stories high. The scene outside was idyllic. Colorful ponies, finely dressed, went about their business along cobblestone sidewalks bordering a boulevard of grass – a geometrically perfect field of green divided into precision shapes by cobblestone paths and a huge reflective pool. The buildings on the other side were largely obscured by trees, but I could tell they were as regal and impressive as the one I was in.

Balconies and mezzanines arced around the airy open atrium. Large gardening boxes held full-grown apple trees. And everywhere, ponies moved about busily. After looking about briefly, my host focused on the light-colored marble floor below, where a throng of ponies were causing a disturbance.

It was a small mob, pressing in towards the single figure in the center. A zebra.

“Go back where you came from!”

“Did you think you could just trot into a Ministry?”

“Better wiped than striped!”

“What are you doing here? Are you a spy?”

A voice rang out over the crowd as a familiar orange pony with blond mane and tail came trotting down an arching stairway. “Simmer down, sallie. Zecora ain’t no spy!”

Applejack reached the throng and quickly dispersed the ponies, who grumbled as they went back to work. In just over a minute, it was just her standing alone with the extremely out-of-place zebra. Other ponies were giving them a wide berth, shooting stares. Applejack shot even better stares back, causing several to shy away, picking up their pace.

Finally, she turned to the zebra, looking deeply apologetic. “Zecora, ya really ought not t’ be walkin’ ’round like that. T’ain’t safe these days.”

“I thought I could visit a friend,” the zebra replied in an exotic and strangely poetic voice. “I should have known how it would end.”

“Well, there is a war on,” Applejack said reasonably. She lifted a hoof to scratch beneath her ear, looking embarrassed.

“Ponies hate and fear me still, no better than in Ponyville.” The zebra’s voice was deep with disappointment. “To you folk zebras may seem strange, but ponies… ponies never change.”

“Gee, thanks,” Applejack frowned, bristling a little. Then she let out a sigh. “Let’s jus’ get ya outta sight, okay? Come with me…” Applejack paused, looking around the huge atrium. “Ah *should* have an office in here somewhere.”

This is her Ministry, and she doesn’t even know where her office is?

“Lady Applejack, how good to…” a gentlestallion called out, approaching from a different stairwell. He stopped as he spotted the zebra. “oh my!”

“ugh,” Applejack grimaced, facehoofing. “Not you too, Starshine. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with Zecora. She’s muh friend.”

“Oh, of course!” the gentlestallion said gracefully. “I have nothing against zebras. In fact, my company is one of the only in Canterlot who make a practice of hiring zebras.” Well wasn’t he a smarmy buck. “Let the Ministry of Propaganda say what it will…”

“Ministry of *Image,*” Applejack corrected.

“I believe that’s what I said,” Starshine stated dismissively, turning his attention fully to the zebra. “Anyway… Zecora, is it? Should you ever find yourself looking for work, look me up. Anyone who has Lady Applejack’s hoofprint of approval…”

“Was there somethin’ you wanted, Starshine?” Applejack interrupted impatiently.

“Oh yes. I just wanted to pass on a little thank you for M.W.T.’s support for our Stalliongrad and Manehattan expansions. Everything’s working smoothly, and I expect nothing short of a stellar success.”

“uh… Ah told ya before, Starshine. We don’t take buckbacks. Ain’t how we operate here.”

“Of course, of course. Banish the thought!” the gentlestallion said in genial apology “No, this is just a friendly gift. But never you mind then.” He didn’t want to offend, of course. Greasy git. Absolutely everything about this pony was striking a negative note with me. From the look on her face, Applejack didn’t seem to like him much either.

“Now, Zecora…” he said, turning back to the zebra woman. “How do you feel about public transportation?”

The stallion standing on the balcony next to me spoke in a quiet voice, drawing my attention away from the scene below:

"Now she's trotting around publicly announcing friendships with zebras. The publicity alone could sink us."

I felt my host nodding along with the others.

"Gentlecolts, I think it's time we discussed Applejack's retirement."

* * *

I came out of the memory feeling cold. It was appalling, the sort of memory you only kept for blackmail. I pushed the memory orb far away from me.

* * *

"SteelHooves?" I approached the Steel Ranger cautiously. "I want to talk to you about Applejack and her Ministry."

The helmet of the armor-clad Ranger turned towards me. He said nothing.

"You knew her… probably better than anyone other than family and her lifelong friends. What… what happened?"

"Megaspells fell," SteelHooves deadpanned. "Everypony died."

I sighed. He was going to be that way about it. I tried again. "What happened between her and the Ministry of Technology?"

"Are you ordering me to tell you?" he asked strangely.

"No…" I said, the question making me feel awkward. "I'm *asking* you. I just… I wanted to know."

"Because you know it will be tactically advantageous to have that information?"

I hung my head in exasperation. "No. Because…" I stopped, unsure. "Because, as dumb as this probably sounds, I care." My words surprised me, as did the truth behind them. Somehow, I'd come to actually care for this group of six ponies from two hundred years ago, the Ministry mares. I didn't understand why. It made no sense. But at some point, my glimpses into the past had evolved from mere academic curiosity to a genuine feeling of attachment.

Maybe it was meeting Spike. Hearing his stories of a bright and joyous past, and the adventures of these close friends, certainly sealed the transformation. Part of me wanted a happy ending for at least *one* of them.

Reality painted the chance of that as heart-wrenchingly bleak. I knew that, but I wasn't willing to stop hoping anyway. Looking past SteelHooves, I took in the night-shrouded Equestrian Wasteland. The low clouds over Fillydelphia glowed a dark red, reflecting the lights from below.

Hell. We were literally going into hell.

The low rumble of SteelHooves' voice startled me.

"Applejack had no taste for being an administrator," he began. I turned toward the ghoul pony who had, I was certain, once been Applejack's lover. "It wasn't like running a farm or organizing the Winter Wrap-Up…" I heard a snort of laughter from inside his helmet. "…Which, come to think of it, she needed Twilight Sparkle's help for anyway. So she just hired a whole bunch of business ponies to do it for her."

I wondered how many of those I had just shared a balcony with.

"Applejack's intention," SteelHooves continued with a touch of uncharacteristic nostalgia, "was for the Ministry of Technology to help encourage and subsidize enterprises that were pushing greater technological and industrial advancement. The Ministry promoted the principles of the earth pony way and sought to help make Equestria better for all ponies through that ethic."

SteelHooves was looking out at the horizon. At Fillydelphia. His voice held firm, but I could tell this was an emotional thing for the ghoul pony to talk about. I listened reverently, knowing that this was a gift.

"Applejack didn't want to stick her hooves into other pony's businesses any more than she wanted anypony messing around with her farm. She believed in the inherently good nature of ponies, and felt they should be left to the guidance of their own virtues…"

He turned to me suddenly, a note of bitterness creeping into his voice. "The problem is, industries and corporations *aren't* ponies. They don't *have* a good nature. They're like… maneframes, calculating risk and profit. And if the numbers are strong enough, they'd throw baby fillies into the gears of their own machinery to grease the flow of capital." I suddenly found myself thinking of the Crusader Maneframe in Stable Twenty-Nine.

"When Applejack returned to the Ministry of Technology after the death of her brother, her only intention was to focus the efforts of the Ministry for as long as it took to create a new, better suit of armor. One that would not fail to protect a pony like Big Macintosh's armor had failed to save him.

"But the longer she stayed, the deeper the pit of horrors she began to uncover. What wasn't corrupt was out of control. And so she tried to fix things. Tried to put bit and reins on development, regulate corporate misconduct."

SteelHooves fell silent, staring at me for a long time. I felt he was assessing my understanding, and perhaps with it my worthiness of this gift.

Finally, he finished by adding, "And that's not something anypony was going to be happy about. And that some ponies wouldn't stand for."

⁂

> *"Do you know what word I hate more than any other? Slave.*
>
> *"Yes, we are all bound in the chains of industry. But even more, there is a greater chain that holds us together. It is the chain of mutual responsibility. And to break free of that chain is to become nothing better than a raider, the most loathsome and repugnant sort of leech on our great Equestria.*
>
> *"If I am a slave because I am not independent of virtue and accountability to my fellow pony, then I do not want freedom! The freedom to be worthless, destructive, unproductive… license to abandon the future that only together we may achieve… this is not liberty. It is anarchy at its most vile. And the good, hard-working and honorable ponies of Equestria will not stand for it. Will you?*
>
> *"Raiders are the epitome of the sins of the past. Selfish, lazy, greedy. They take what they cannot build for themselves. And they destroy what they cannot take. They infest the Equestrian Wasteland like termites, chewing away at the already frail bones of our once-great nation. They even skitter about in the ruins of Fillydelphia,*

chittering just outside The Wall.

"Rest assured, my little ponies, that when the rebirth comes, there will be no room for such harmful and parasitical insects in our new world. Those who do not join the Unity will be crushed under our hooves. Stamped out, once and for all.

"We may not even have to wait that short time. Even today, the glorious army of the Children of Unity grows stronger, mightier. And the Goddess sends out Her children, created in Her image, to scour the wasteland.

"Yes… to those of you out there who are termites… to the raiders, the Steel Rangers and the cannibals, I have this to say:

"The Purge is coming!"

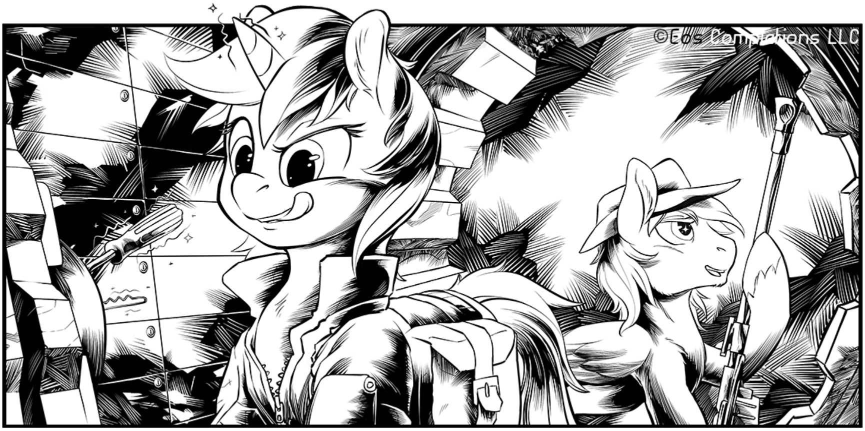
Footnote: Level Up.

Skills Note: Lockpicking has reached 100%

New Perk: Clever Prancer – Through agility and reflexes, you have become deft at striking where it hurts while preventing your enemies from doing the same. You gain an additional 5% chance to score a critical hit; your enemies suffer a 25% penalty to their chance to critically hit you. This perk is only effective when wearing light or no armor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Patterns of Behavior



"Well, my child, it's quite dangerous to explore places where you do not belong. Where were you headed that you ended up in my private chambers?"

"Curiosity."

I halted, bobby pin and screwdriver hovering between me and the wall safe, at SteelHooves' muttered comment. This safe was the only container within the Helpinghoof Clinic which hadn't been successfully scavenged by ponies before us. Anything that could hold valuables had been already looted; brighter spots on faded walls showed where medical boxes, probably locked, had simply been torn away from their mountings.

"Huh?" Eloquent as always, Littlepip.

SteelHooves whinnied, "Your little friend Homage asked me what I thought your defining characteristic was."

"What? When?" Oh Goddesses, what did SteelHooves tell her? Please don't let it be bad. Or embarrassing.

"While you were hospitalized," SteelHooves responded bluntly. "Do you really find it surprising that she would ask your companions about you?"

No, not really. She was probably trying to get to know the real me more, especially before taking our relationship to a new level. It was… wise. I just wasn't sure SteelHooves was the pony I would have wanted her getting a reference from.

"What did you say?" I asked nervously. And then felt immediately stupid. He'd just answered that, didn't he? "I mean… okay. Curiosity. That isn't so bad. Yeah, I'm curious. I don't think you could call it my *defining* characteristic."

"We're walking into hell," Velvet Remedy interjected, "And Littlepip is sightseeing."

"No," I argued. "I'm not…" I stopped talking at her knowing smile. "Hey, the Clinic was right here; right on our way. And you know we could use the medical supplies, if we find any."

"Ayep. Y'all should 'ave seen Li'lpip in Stable Twenty-Four," Calamity agreed. Mimicking my voice (poorly, I might add), he called out, "Dangerous critters? Let's explore!"

"Hey. You're the one who wanted to go on the next adventure with me."

"Ah figure she's been like this ever since steppin' hoof outta her own Stable," Calamity concluded. "Reckon' Ah can't blame 'er. Livin' in a box…"

"Oh no," Velvet Remedy chimed in. "She was like this inside the Stable too." I sighed. Apparently, this was going to be Tease Littlepip Day. I turned away, choosing to focus on the wall safe. Let them have their fun.

Velvet continued, "When other colts and fillies decided to try new things in an effort to provoke their cutie marks into showing, they'd try soccer. Or ballet. Littlepip? She tries to invent the art of breaking into other ponies' private things."

I broke the bobby pin. Which was really frustrating since this lock was well beneath my skills.

I took a deep breath, looking in a random direction that was neither the safe nor my friends. Pyrelight had perched on an IV stand in the corner near a medical bed. Behind her was a Ministry of Peace poster of a smiling Fluttershy with a white rabbit sitting on her head and colorful birds and butterflies flocking around her. The top of the poster read simply "Remember:" but the bottom half was so badly damaged that I couldn't tell what it was trying to say. There must have been some gentle but insidious power in Fluttershy's image, for I found myself feeling ashamed that we had forgotten what she told us not to.

"Well," I grunted, hovering out a replacement bobby pin. "Maybe curiosity is my virtue then."

My three companions looked at each other quietly, skeptically. Pyrelight let out a soft whoop as smiles broke across their faces (or, at least, across the muzzles of Calamity and Velvet Remedy). Simultaneously, they turned to me and told me that no, it was definitely a vice.

* * *

"Well, that was unexpected," Calamity noted, staring through the open safe into the building adjacent to the Helpinghoof Clinic. The entire back of the safe was gone, as was a significant amount of the other building's wall. Judging by the damage, it looked as if a large magical energy weapon on the scale of the Junction R-7 cannon had been used to melt through the wall. "Somepony had a hard-on fer this safe."

"They were stupid then," I commented. "That blast probably destroyed anything that was in here."

SteelHooves spoke, "I don't think this was the safe they were intending to use that weapon for."

"How do ya figure?"

"First, this safe was hidden. It's likely they didn't even know it was here."

SteelHooves was right. The safe had been hidden behind a large, framed sign; most scavengers wouldn't have thought to pull it down and look behind it. But ever since

Homage revealed her safe behind the Splendid Valley painting, I'd fallen into the habit of peeking behind frames. Something which undoubtedly added fodder to my companions' discussion of my so-called vice.

I glanced over to where the sign was propped against a medical rack. It was very much unlike the posters I had grown used to. A more forthright and clinical warning from the past:

> **Wartime Stress Disorder**
>
> *For over a thousand years, ponies have known only peace.*
>
> *It should be no surprise then, that so many are not able to cope with the harsh realities of war.*
>
> *Wartime Stress Disorder is a very real illness that affects thousands of ponies each year.*
>
> *Know what to look for:*
>
> - *Depression*
> - *Anxiety*
> - *Lack of Sleep*
> - *Loss of Appetite*
> - *Unpatriotic Thoughts*
> - *Suicidal Impulses*
>
> *If you, or any of your loved ones, are experiencing two or more of these symptoms, it may be WSD.*
>
> *If so, ask for help. No pony needs to suffer alone. Knowledgeable and Caring Ponies trained by the Ministry of Peace are waiting to help.*

I spared it only a glance before turning my attention back to SteelHooves. (Having read the sign before floating it down, I didn't need to read it again.)

"Second," SteelHooves continued, having apparently paid more attention to our surroundings than I had, "the building next to the clinic was a bank."

I had admittedly dismissed the building next door after discovering the doors were blocked by interior rubble. I could see now (through the safe) that a fair amount of the interior was intact. And a bank promised to be interesting. "Okay," I said, floating out the zebra rifle. "I'm going through."

I started to climb up into the safe only to feel teeth bite down on my tail and pull me back.

"Oh no y'aint!" Calamity said, letting go. "Ain't no way any o' the rest o' us c'n wiggle through that thing," he said, pointing a hoof at the wall safe. I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off. "Ah ain't lettin' ya brave the place alone. Whatever destroyed that wall might still be lurkin' in there." Calamity smirked, "Besides, y'said yer next adventure would be with me. Ya promised an' Ah'm holdin' ya to it."

I slumped. He had a point. Then I brightened. "Once I'm inside, I'll be able to see the rubble blocking the front door and levitate it out of the way. I can let you all in through the front. It will only take a moment."

They looked at each other again and I could read on their faces a begrudging acceptance that this was going to happen. I'd set my hooves to it; there was no stopping me (short of a tranquilizer dart to the breast).

I floated the zebra rifle ahead of me, my current weapon of choice. Calamity and I had spent time in the early morning looting the locked ammo boxes from the surviving convoy chariots on the overpass; as a result, I was no longer worried about ammo for the zebra rifle. (I had been surprised to find that, even up here, everything that wasn't locked up had been looted. But Calamity reminded me that he wasn't the only flier in the Equestrian Wasteland.)

I counted us lucky when we had moved beyond hellhound territory and into the jagged hellscape of the Fillydelphia suburbs without any encounters. During our trek, Calamity and I had scouted ahead, being by far the stealthiest members of our group. I had kept my PipBuck radio off. Only the tiniest amount of noise leaked out of my earbloom for others to possibly hear, but I suspected the keen-eared hellhounds might notice even that. I was yearning to turn it on again and hear what else Red Eye might have to say.

With a second look at the safe, I decided to shuck my saddlebags. It was going to be tight and I didn't want to get stuck. I could float them through behind me once I was inside. Or, worst case, go back into the clinic and get them after I cleared the bank's front door.

No encounters also meant I still owed Calamity an adventure. And I wanted to pay off that debt before we got into the heart of Fillydelphia. We were looking at trotting into slaver territory, and I feared for my companions' safety. It's not that I doubted their ability or courage. But… the anxiety I felt didn't lend itself easily to words. I suppose I feared that my friends were not only dear to me, but would be dear to them in an entirely different and unpleasant way. In the eyes of the slavers, what kind of prize would a pegasus be? Or Velvet Remedy?

The Goddesses only know how they would react to a Steel Ranger. And the last thing I could afford to do was launch an assault on the entire damn slaver army.

Honestly, I was almost to Fillydelphia and I had no idea what I was going to do when I got there. My entire plan was to get there, take a look, and pray that what I saw would tell me where to go next. With dismay, I accepted the very real possibility that I might get there only to turn around and slink back home. My friends were counting on me to be better than that. All those slaves were counting on somepony to stand up for them.

I suddenly pictured myself trotting up to a gate, knocking and telling the guard on the other side, "Hello, I'm here to stand up for the slaves." The daydream ended with the image of me getting shot in the head.

So yeah, maybe I was sightseeing. Distractions to give myself time.

I pulled myself up into the narrow black rectangle of the safe and slithered through.

* * *

"A mare approached me just the other day. 'Thank you, Red Eye!' she said. 'You have given my life meaning. I was wretched before, but now I am part of something great. And I know that something even greater waits for me. The opportunity of a lifetime.'

"Of course, she was only saying this in an attempt to get close to me so that she

could use the crude knife she had crafted out of stolen metal. But still, her words moved me. So I did not have her killed on the spot.

"Instead, I sent her to The Pit, where she would have the chance to exercise those murderous impulses for a more worthy goal…"

Velvet Remedy had darted into the mares' room off of the bank lobby, and we were all politely pretending not to hear her. The lobby radio helped, Red Eye's words adding to the buzzing of the flies. Looking around, it pained me that my stomach wasn't rebelling nearly as hard. The stench made my eyes water. But I had seen too much, too often. I could tell I was becoming numb. And it scared the horseapples out of me.

I heard water start to run in one of the restroom's sinks, and I felt the sudden urge to dash in. We hadn't checked the local water, but I was sure that it was radioactive. Velvet must know that, but I doubted she was thinking clearly.

"Splayed pony bodies and profane graffiti," Velvet said with a weak smile as she rejoined us. "Raider chic." She turned to me, "Let me thank you again for taking me to such lovely places."

I honestly felt bad about this one.

Once, the lobby been a place for ponies to mill around while waiting their turn with one of the tellers whose counters lined one side of the room, or who had business in the back meeting rooms like the one I had crawled into through the safe whose backside had been obliterated. But the raiders had taken a perverse glee in defiling this place, the extent of which I hadn't seen since the Ponyville Library. The crucified dog hanging from the ceiling lamp was a particularly revolting touch.

"Ah agree with Li'lpip," Calamity noted, having taken a look at the rear meeting room which had abutted the clinic. "Raiders livin' here tussled with some invaders who were a heap more dangerous. Lotsa raider bodies, none of their attackers."

"Well, one," I corrected him. "Sorta." The pile of ash at what had been the center of the magical destruction had still been glowing slightly pink, suggesting the battle wasn't that long ago.

Calamity nodded. "Muh guess? Lucky shot," he said. "From the way that whole wall was disintegrated back far 'nuff t' touch the safe next door, muh guess is that one o' the invaders was carryin' a saddlebag fulla magical energy grenades or somesuch, and one o' the raiders put a bullet through it."

"Well, they obviously didn't get in through the front door. Or the safe. So that means there's another way in here." I looked to SteelHooves. "Do you remember what the building on the other side of the bank was?"

Noise from somewhere above us killed the conversation. Dust rained down from the ceiling as pony hooves clopped over the floor above. The hanging lamp swayed as they passed over it, a rotting piece of the crucified dog falling to the floor with a meaty sound. I floated my rifle close. Calamity gave his battle saddle a reload kick.

"Honestly," Velvet Remedy whispered. "Has it ever occurred to either of you that they might be friendly?"

"Nope."

"Stand back," SteelHooves growled. Gleaning his intention, I dashed for the bathroom, wrapping a surprised Velvet in a levitation field and pulling her in after me. Pyrelight dove through the doorway over our heads. Calamity swooped back towards the meeting room.

Cha-pwoot. BOOM!

The shot from SteelHooves' grenade machinegun detonated against the ceiling in a flash of fire and stucco. With a rending crash, the ceiling came down, bringing five raider ponies crashing into the lobby. One buck with mangy coat and a flaming skull for a cutie mark landed hard on a teller counter and bounced out of sight. A mare with a spiked pink mane got herself tangled in a gruesome exhibit fashioned out of at least three colts' entrails, a zebra sword falling from her muzzle and clattering across the floor. It slid to a stop at Calamity's hooves.

One last raider pony stood above us at the edge of the collapsed floor, a hunting rifle floating at his flank. His gaze fell on me, sliding down my body … and now I *did* want to vomit. His eyes suddenly widened, and he darted out of sight.

The other raider ponies tried to scramble to their feet. SteelHooves rapid-fired six more grenades into their midst. I saw Velvet Remedy's shield flicker around the two of us, just in time to save us from the blast of shrapnel and bloody body parts. The eyeball of a raider pony splatted against the magical field inches from my face and began to slide down it.

I ended up violently emptying the contents of my stomach after all. Canned corn does not taste as well coming up as it does going down.

⁂

"The one that fell over here got away," Calamity called out, hovering in the air on the other side of the teller aisle. A doorway into the bank's back offices marked the raider's most likely avenue of escape.

Spitting out another mouthful of water from my canteen, I replied, "Had another one upstairs who bolted too." I felt weak and embarrassed, but tried to focus on the danger at our hooves. The surviving raider ponies could be getting reinforcements, assuming there were any to get. I was more worried they were setting traps.

Calamity snorted. "Raiders run from us now?" He flew up into the room above. "Course, they could be fixin' an ambush."

Velvet Remedy looked up at Calamity's underside. "Oh come now. Are you really that surprised?"

She poked a hoof at me. "The smallest of us is a walking arsenal. You're a pegasus with a custom-built battle saddle, and SteelHooves… is SteelHooves. By Luna, we look like grim reaper ponies."

Velvet Remedy trotted towards the carnage. "Any raider *this* well armed…" she said, floating a bloodstained baseball bat with gruesome nails driven through it out of the rubble, "…is going to take one look at us and gallop for the hills if she has any brain left at all."

I grimaced. Not that I minded looking like a reaper pony to raiders (I damn well *ought to!),* but because Velvet's comments brought back memories of the twisted view of us that SteelHooves had once professed to Calamity.

SteelHooves was looking at the zebra sword. The gemstone in its hilt was cracked and blackened; whatever enchantment the weapon had once held had died with that stone.

"Okay…" I said, collecting my thoughts. "The main vault is in the basement. The other way into the bank is probably upstairs, coming across from the next building." I looked to my companions, giving them an opportunity to disagree. "Velvet, SteelHooves, you two head up. Between the two of you, I'm sure you can greet anypony you find up there with the appropriate levels of loving kindness or overwhelming force."

Velvet Remedy shot me a wry look but nodded. (How in Luna's Name did I end up the defacto leader again?) After seeing how my fellow Stable Dweller handled a hellhound, I wasn't so worried about her safety.

"I'm the safecracker, so I have to head down. Calamity, you're with me."

⁂

POW!

A well-placed twin-shot from Calamity's battle saddle caused the magical energy turret to explode, flinging shrapnel across the hall. Slipping into the zen of S.A.T.S., I targeted the two remaining turrets and unloaded two rounds into each of them. They barely got a shot off, scorching an armor plate on my utility barding and giving me a painful but bearable burn beneath.

We crept up past the guard desk and peered down the hallway beyond. It had a few doors that opened to side rooms, and at the end was the massive metal door of the vault, a terminal glowing on the wall beside it.

As Calamity started into the hall, I paused at the desk. I spotted a book which had slid down behind it. *Increasing Your Sales Figures.* The picture on the front was a satisfied customer eating an apple. I floated the book into my saddlebags, having exhausted my current book collection and left it at Junction R-7. I trotted into the hallway, catching up with Calamity.

A scorching bolt of green energy shot past me, hitting the wall behind us and melting a hole, turning the faux wood paneling and bricks beneath into glowing green goo.

"There's nothing better than the smell of melting zebras in the morning!"

Crap. One of these.

"Back!" I shouted to Calamity. The two of us barely made it to the corner when the multi-limbed hoverbot floated around the corner. I felt flame lick at my tail as the robot hosed down the hallway we had just been in with its flamethrower.

"Ow! Ow ow ow!" I pranced, flames licking at my tail, until Calamity stomped the fire out. "AAAAAoooooooow!"

"Pardon."

I whimpered, tears in my eyes. "Thanks."

On our way down, Calamity had prodded me to unlock every ammo box, coin till and desk. His saddlebags were now virtually overflowing with golden pre-war coins as well as packages of cigarettes and bubblegum and other things he considered worth the weight. I wasn't really expecting to find a merchant we could trade with in Fillydelphia, but I said nothing. I had taken most of the ammo, including a prince's prize of four magical energy grenades.

"Well, grenades did the trick last time," I whispered, floating two of them out. "And unlike alicorns, I'm pretty sure I can trick these things the same way twice."

I sat on my haunches before the wall-mounted terminal next to the vault door, the smoldering wreckage of the hoverbot in the hall behind us. The door to this vault was almost identical to the one under Shattered Hoof, except that this one had no exterior lock, rendering all my skills at lockpicking useless. However, by hacking into the terminal, I was sure I could tweak the spell matrix and get the door to slide open.

Calamity stood guard over me as I worked. We both looked up when the muffled sound of an explosion echoed from somewhere several floors above.

“Not loving kindness, then.”

“Nope.”

“If I survive all of this, one day I’m going to sit down and write a sequel to the *Wasteland Survival Guide,* covering all the things Ditzy Doo managed to leave out.” I loved the ghoul pony, but… seriously, a whole section on radhogs and barely a mention of hellhounds? And the chapter about making robots work for you was completely hoof-fucked.

I concentrated on the puzzle before me, working my way through possibilities of code until I settled on the right one. This was almost as hard as Pinkie Pie’s terminal. Almost.

With a series of loud clanks, the vault door slid down into the floor. I raised an eyebrow at that, then stepped into the vault.

Somepony had already been in here. Only a scattering of pre-war coins remained, and most of the smaller safes that lined the walls were open and empty.

“Well, now Ah’m depressed.”

I took note of three smaller safes and one large one which still seemed intact. The locks on these suggested a level of skill required that was beyond… was this the work of the same rival lockpicker who made such a mess of the Hippocampus Energy Plant #12?

No, that would be absurd. But the little pony in my head wouldn’t give up the notion.

I started on the largest safe first, confident in my ability to beat it, and eager to show up my imaginary rival.

It took effort to open the safe, but the tumblers finally fell into place. The large door nudged open. I pulled it back with my telekinesis enthusiastically, driven to see what was inside.

Inside were two objects, one of which I had seen before, recently, through binoculars: an anti-machine rifle. Only this one was pristine, with golden, flame-styled filigree, a custom bit, deep citrines embedded in the barrel and an embossed nameplate that read “Spitfire’s Thunder”. It was also broken down to fit in the safe. Some assembly required.

Calamity whistled at the sight of the massive gun.

My own attention was drawn to the small box next to it. The box had a familiar apple insignia on it, although just one rather than the three on Little Macintosh. I floated it out. The box had its own lock, but it looked significantly easier to pick.

“Them gems on that there barrel? Ah’ve seen gemstones like that b’fore,” Calamity was saying behind me, still fascinated by the gun. “They hold an enchantment that sucks up the buck of the gun. Makes it so’s a Pegasus can fire it without getting’ knocked off course.”

I chuckled. He probably thought he was being subtle. “You want it? It’s yours.” I grinned. "I've even got some bullets for it."

The box with the apple clicked open. I realized I'd seen a box like this before as well. In Vinyl Scratch's safe. Like that one, this held four memory orbs.

I set the opened box down. Behind me, Calamity was doing his best not to squee. "Thank ya, Lil'pip. That's mighty gracious of ya…"

"Calamity," I shushed him with a smile. "Stand guard. I might be gone for a bit." The orange-maned pegasus spotted the box of memory orbs and nodded, turning to face the vault entrance in a battle-ready stance.

I tilted my horn down towards the box, picking a memory orb at random, and focused. The bank, Calamity and the entire Equestrian Wasteland washed away.

* * *

Applejack was looking at me like I had lost my mind.

"And just what the hay d'ya think yer wearin' that fer?"

I had really hoped to learn more about the past… and, with any luck, the Mares of the Ministries. But to find one of them addressing me, up close and personal? This seemed beyond the stroke of fortune.

The room around us looked very much like the suites in Tenpony Tower must have in their prime. This was a Ministry Hub, perhaps? There was a song playing in the background that I had heard before:

"I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.
How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?
When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding
And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

It took me a moment to place it, but I had once seen SteelHooves virtually entranced by the song.

"To remember tonight," I felt my mouth say. The words came out in a smooth, low rumble. Oh Luna… it was SteelHooves' voice! More urbane and not nearly as gravelly as the ghoul's we knew, but it was definitely him.

How the hell had this memory ended up here? In this bank? It only now occurred to me that maybe SteelHooves had known what the building next door had been not because he had noticed it today but because he *remembered* it.

"Ah hell no. Ah ain't doing nothin' with ya while yer wearing that ridiculous recollector, Applesnack!" Applejack put her hoof down. "Now take it off."

Wait, what? Oh no. I really, really shouldn't be here. This was… private. And…

"I'll tie you up. With your own lasso."

Applejack's eyes went wide, a blush forming on her freckled cheeks.

Oh sweet Celestia have mercy. Not only was I invading SteelHooves' private memories, but the buck was aroused. I could feel a hot hardness that I fought to escape from. I prayed to the Goddesses to pull me out of this memory, spare me this. And my ghoul companion too. He didn't deserve to have me *here*. And I very much *didn't want* to be here.

Eyes narrowing dangerously, "An' jus' what makes ya think ya have what it takes t' best me w' muh own lasso, soldier-buck?"

(Part of my brain paused to marvel that the country filly turned major political figure had fallen for a city buck turned soldier.)

SteelHooves… no, Applesnack leaned forward (that hot pressure in his groin becoming unbearable to me) and whispered huskily, "Because I know it turns you on."

Way too much information! Please, Celestia, Luna, anypony… stop the memory… need to get off now! Aaaah! I mean leave. *Need to* leave now!

I almost felt my prayers were answered when a loud chiming sound rang out from a nearby, glowing terminal. Applejack shook off her deer-caught-in-sleigh's-lights expression. "Still no," she decided, turning away towards the terminal. "Now, Ah gots t' take this. And ya best not be wearin' that thing when Ah'm done. Y'look ridiculous!"

I felt my host sigh, then trot slowly towards what I recognized as the bathroom door. A sudden shot of horror went through me. Applesnack was still sporting his… hardness. Goddess, please don't let them have a full-length mirror in there!

A cry of dismay from the orange-coated older mare solved my concerns with startling quickness. "What's wrong?" I felt myself say in Applesnack's voice.

The mare of the Ministry of Technology was scrolling through information on the terminal's screen as fast as her hoof would let her. "No…" she moaned. "No, they wouldn't!" Her voice was becoming louder and more strained. "No! They… they… How could they?!"

Again, more firmly, "AJ, love, what's wrong."

Applejack turned towards her soldier-buck with the start of tears in her eyes and a frightening edge in her voice. "Ironshod's what's wrong!" She spit as the other emotions struggling behind her face lost out to fury. "One year! The Steel Rangers 'ave been around for *one year,* and Ironshod Firearms has gone an' built a gun designed t' punch through their armor! They've build a gun to kill our own!"

I felt Applesnack go rigid at the news.

The blond-maned mare was strutting back and forth in barely contained outrage. "They're callin' it the anti-machine rifle. But what it really is… is the anti-magical-power-armor rifle!" She spun, tears in her eyes. "How long before the zebras get 'hold o' this? They've just *killed our own!"*

I felt my host swallow. He was doing amazingly well at keeping his heart rate down, but while I couldn't sense Applesnack's emotions, I could feel the physical toll.

"Ah put everythin' Ah had inta findin' a better way t' keep our soldier ponies safe," Applejack raged. "Ah sold muh farm! Ah fought the ponies of muh own Ministry t' get this done."

She turned, her wide eyes filled with tears. "Ah. Sold. Muh. *Farm!"*

A lump formed in my throat. My heart hurt for the mare, and my hooves wanted to lash out at the evil ponies who could be so thoughtless.

The orange pony spun and bucked her bureau so hard it shattered into splinters and piles of clothing. "This is a betrayal! They can't do this!" My host watched as his mare looked around for something else to buck; then she seemed to have a better idea.

"Ah'm goin' down there!" Applejack decided abruptly. "Ah got family down in Ironshod. Braeburn will listen…"

I felt a sinking sensation in my heart.

"SteelHooves," Applejack barked, addressing my host not by her lover's name but by his military designation. “Call Wingright. Tell him t’ be on the roof in two minutes an’ t’ have my personal chariot ready. If Ah leave now, Ah c’n make it t’ Ironshod b’fore mornin’. Maybe Ah c’n head this whole thing off b’fore…”

“AJ, love…” Applesnack offered slowly, trying to be reasonable, “If they’ve already invented it, then you can’t put that apple back on the tree.” I knew he was right. The other item in the safe had been proof enough of that.

Applejack shot us both a look (or, at least, it sure felt that way). “Well, *somepony* ain’t gettin’ any fer a good bit.” If I could speak, I would have told her that such expectations had long passed. “Now make that call!”

The orange pony turned back to gaze at the scattered fragments of wood and dresses. “Great. Now Ah’ve got t’ find somethin’ official-lookin’ t’ wear.”

Less than three minutes later, SteelHooves was saying goodbye to Applejack as she stepped into the elevator outside their suite. The call to Wingright had been made and the Ministry Mare’s chariot was waiting on the pegasus landing platform.

“Ah’ll be back b’fore ya know it,” Applejack insisted, dressed in a stiff, formal suit-dress (that did not appear to get much use) and looking slightly less murderous but no less determined. “Ah’m sorry this night ain’t gone like ya was hopin’ fer. Ah’ll make it up t’ ya. Promise.”

She turned and raised a hoof, touching the button for the landing platform. As the ornate doors slid closed, she cocked her head. “An’ take that recollector off. Ya look…”

The doors closed. A soft whirr could be heard as the elevator began to ascend. My host looked up, watching the arrow above the elevator doors slowly glide across the numbers. Floor four. Five. Six…

Applesnack turned back towards the door of his and Applejack’s suite. The recollector was actually starting to itch.

A loud TWANG sounded from inside the elevator shaft behind him. He spun back towards those ornate doors as he heard Applejack’s elevator carriage rumble downward past his floor, gaining speed.

Then there was a loud, horrendous, metal-twisting *THUD.*

* * *

I burst back to the real world, shaking from the memory, still feeling Applesnack’s scream as if it had come from my lips.

Looking up, I found SteelHooves’ visor staring down at me. I cringed back, wanting to crawl into the safe.

His low, gravelly voice simply stated, “Definitely a vice.”

* * *

“What is Unity?” the voice of Red Eye sounded in my earbloom.

Calamity and Velvet Remedy had naturally taken the lead as we worked our way back through the bank. My hooves felt heavy, like mine were the ones wrapped in steel. I couldn’t look at SteelHooves. I could feel him staring into me, not saying anything. It was so much worse than being yelled at.

"Unity is you. Unity is your family. Your mother and father. Your brothers and sisters. Or, at least, it will be. I have seen it. And yes, Unity will be me as well. But for now, I am merely its, and thus your, humble servant. The Goddess has gifted me with the vision of Unity, and it is She who will bring peace to this troubled land.

"Think of me as nothing but a courier, delivering the message of evolution. We follow the Goddess in Her great quest to heal this land and all the good ponies within it.

"No pony dies in Fillydelphia unless they choose to. And in the New Equestria, no pony will need ever die again. When the time has come for your toil to be over, you have but to submit yourself. Already, the Goddess is taking those who come to her, pulling them to her bosom, and transforming them. Their old, weak, sick bodies are peeled away, replaced by a new, transcendent form…"

As we were passing the open doorframe of an office, SteelHooves lifted a metal-clad hoof and shoved me inside. He followed. Clearly, he wanted to be alone with me. Looking anywhere but him, I stammered an apology. He ignored it.

"Which one did you see?" he asked coldly.

I looked up at him, startled.

"Which. Memory. Did you see?"

I flushed with icy embarrassment. "The… one where…" I fought to find the least intrusive description. "…Applejack learned about Ironshod making anti-machine rifles?"

"Oh," SteelHooves said. The other three memories were locked safely away in his pack. "The 'accident'."

I recalled Apple Bloom's strained voice:

Some folks 're sayin' that maybe t'wasn't so much of an accident. They say… that maybe t'was somepony within 'er own Ministry.

"The biggest row Applejack had was over the anti-machine rifle," SteelHooves informed me. I sensed that, having seen the memory, he wanted me to have a touch of context. It was abnormally forthcoming of him. Even more odd considering how deeply in the wrong I was.

"On one hoof, I couldn't really blame them," SteelHooves admitted. "You wouldn't either if you saw some of the robots the zebras had begun to deploy on the battlefield."

I found myself nodding, despite the ache in my heart for Applejack. I remembered that tank-like sentinel robot in Four Stars. I'd fired on it with armor-piercing bullets from a sniper rifle at a distance of yards, and only a precision shot to a volatile area had managed to stop it.

"But I knew how bad that hurt her, and how deeply personal she took it. Only made it worse that she had family in Ironshod. Whole thing just about tore her apart…" He nickered behind his helmet. "Damn thing was, the zebras came out with armor-piercing ammo a few months later anyways. Not as effective as an anti-machine rifle at taking down my fellow Rangers, but a well placed round from a rifle could punch through a Ranger's helmet."

SteelHooves looked me over until his visored gaze stopped on Little Macintosh in its holster. "Truth is, with AP ammunition *that* gun could do it. Little Macintosh is possibly the most powerful firearm of its size," a touch of nostalgia crept into his voice. "Designed with the kind of buck to the teeth that only a mare like Applejack could handle easily."

Despite how low I was feeling, a snort of laughter escaped me. According to Spike's story, Applejack was strong enough in the tooth to haul not only her own weight but that of all five of her friends with nothing more than a bite on a dragon's tail.

I had just begun to notice that all the context I was getting was about the firearms, and none about the accident itself, when a thunderous gunshot rang out. Was that Spitfire's Thunder? How far ahead had Calamity and Velvet Remedy gotten, and what had they run into?

I darted around SteelHooves' bulk, dashing out of the room and towards the sound. I could hear the heavy hooves of the Steel Ranger fall in behind me.

* * *

"That was a warnin' shot," I heard Calamity state ahead, his voice muffled and slightly mumbling. "Ah don't give two."

"Warning shots are supposed to miss!" Velvet Remedy barked sternly.

"Ah didn't hit anything vital," was his response. He was speaking slow, his words sounding like they came through clenched teeth.

"That weapon," a gruff mare's voice insisted, "Is the property of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. Surrender it, tribal, and we'll let you live."

"Horseapples!" Now I could tell why Calamity's voice sounded so warped. He was talking while holding Spitfire's Thunder in his muzzle. He was better at it than the slaver with the shovel-spear whom I had encountered my first night out, but not by much. "The only reason ya ain't blown us 'tribals' t' bits is that ya don't wanna hurt the pretty gun."

I heard Pyrelight let out an alarmed squawk.

"Damn!" SteelHooves muttered from behind me as he broke into full gallop, leaving me swiftly behind. I lowered my head, charging forward, trying to keep up. Little Macintosh floated beside me, ready for action.

I came barreling into a lobby full of ponies and stumbled over the severed hindleg of a raider, losing my balance and face-planting into the rubble of the collapsed ceiling. Little Macintosh clattered into the rubble.

"uh… She tripped me!" I offered weakly, getting up. My eyes widened as I took in the five Steel Rangers in the room, only one of which was SteelHooves. One of the four new arrivals had taken a shot through the leg, and Velvet Remedy was fussing over it to the pony's chagrin. Calamity seemed intent on staring down the other three. Without the massive Spitfire's Thunder, my companions and I would have been helplessly outmatched. Even assuming SteelHooves remained on our side.

SteelHooves was standing rigid, staring from Calamity, the unique anti-machine rifle held in his teeth, to the Steel Ranger he had shot through the leg. It was as if Applejack's fears were playing out right in front of him. Calamity's habit of shooting first couldn't have reared at a worst time.

The lead mare of the Steel Rangers quartet was splitting her focus between Calamity and SteelHooves. Addressing the latter, "What are you doing with these primitives?"

SteelHooves ignored her, staring at Calamity. "You shot a Steel Ranger."

"Them friends o' yers came at us with intent t' murder."

Velvet Remedy spoke up again. “Calamity’s right. The moment they saw us, that one’s missile launcher opened up,” she said, pointing a hoof at one of the other Steel Rangers. “And this one charged at us with a magical energy lance.”

“I ask you again,” said the lead mare, stepping forward, “What are you doing here? Soldier, report!” The two uninjured Steel Rangers behind her changed their battle stances to better cover the room, one of them targeting me. I cast my eyes to the floor, searching for where Little Macintosh had fallen.

SteelHooves growled at Calamity, “We will have words.” Then, bothering to spare the mare his attention, he answered. “You are not cleared for that information. You need only know that I am on assignment and that you are interfering. Now order your knights to back down.”

The tension in the air was nearly suffocating.

“I am a Senior Paladin in the Ministry of Wartime Technology. You will address me with proper respect befitting my rank!”

“As will you,” SteelHooves replied with gravelly calm, “When addressing a superior officer.”

A younger buck’s voice sounded behind the helmet of the missile-launcher Ranger. “Elder SteelHooves?”

The question was met by a still room. I spotted Little Macintosh but didn’t dare float it up from the floor, certain that somepony would start shooting.

Calamity broke the silence. “Elder? Well, guess who’s been holdin’ out on us.”

“My apologies, *Star Paladin* SteelHooves,” the senior paladin said carefully. “I did not recognize you. Your armor is that of a much lower station.”

SteelHooves nickered. “Apology accepted.” He turned to the younger buck, “And I would thank you not call me above my station. If you know of me, then you know I refused that position.”

The leading mare was not done, however. “You are far from your stomping grounds, Star Paladin SteelHooves. By protocol, I shall lead you to meet with Elder Blueberry Sabre.” The light on her helmet swiveled to illuminate each of us in turn.

“As for the disposition of your… friends,” she began.

“They are with me,” SteelHooves said firmly. “Lead. I shall follow.”

The steel-encased mare turned and trotted out of the bank. Velvet Remedy stayed close to the wounded one as he rose to his hooves, favoring his injured leg.

As the rest of us began to follow, I floated Little Macintosh to me. The gears in my mind were beginning to turn again. And while I knew better than to start asking questions in the middle of a tense diplomatic situation, it was clear that SteelHooves and I needed to have a big talk.

* * *

“Star Paladin SteelHooves, sir,” the young knight called out, trotting closer to SteelHooves while the other uninjured knight covered Calamity and me with the light machine gun of her battle saddle. “Again, my apologies for before.”

“The matter is passed,” SteelHooves said flatly. I sensed this was not a conversation our ghoul companion wanted to have. I found myself mentally cheering the young knight on.

"Permission to ask a question, sir?"

"No."

"oh…" The knight stopped in his tracks, letting us pass him, then trotted to catch back up. "In that case, permission to speak freely, sir?"

SteelHooves' head drooped just a little. "No."

The knight slowed but did not stop this time.

"Permission granted, Knight Boom," proclaimed the senior paladin. To SteelHooves, she whinnied, "My troops. My territory. My rules."

"Sir, I just wanted to say… there are a lot of Steel Rangers who felt the same way you do. About following in the path of the Ministry's Mare, I mean. If you had taken your rightful place as Elder, a lot of us would have gladly followed you."

SteelHooves remained impassive.

The silence stretched out as we trotted through the suburban wreckage that surrounded Fillydelphia. Slowly, the young knight dropped back into position behind us. I heard his last words, muttered to himself before he fell quiet for the rest of the trip.

"We still would."

* * *

> *"When I was a young buck, I was taught that somehow, some ponies were inferior to others. That those not born as earth ponies were weak, frail, unsuited to labor. Incapable of pulling their own weight without relying on magic.*
>
> *"You, my children, prove every day that the only ponies who are inferior are those who choose to be. Unity is more than just the blessing of the Goddess. It is our search to transcend the laziness and weakness of our ancestors, to reach a higher level of existence. Unity with our fellow ponies, not tearing each other apart, but building each other up, and Equestria with us. And you, my children, are already halfway there.*
>
> *"In you I see that Unity already lies within us, should we just choose to embrace it. The glorious evolution that awaits us is just icing on the cupcake…"*

Explosions ripped through the street. SteelHooves stood alongside the other Steel Rangers as they tore into the slavers taking cover behind the ruined chariots and carriages and even behind the wagon full of slaves that they were transporting into the heart of Fillydelphia. Red Eye's voice died when the grenade barrage from our ghoul's battle saddle obliterated the slaver's radio.

Through the din, nopony heard the shot from above that tore through Knight Buck's helmet, ripping it off his torso, his head turned to jellied mush inside. A Pinkie Pie Balloon floated overhead, turned a raging fuchsia by the dipping sun.

"Take cover!" the senior paladin yelled and the Rangers scattered.

At the turn of events, the surviving slavers began to press forward, filling the street with suppressive fire. I hid behind a trash barrel as bullets riddled it. If the bin hadn't been full of another age's refuse, the bullets would likely have tore through it and perforated my body. As it was, the few which punched through were stopped by my saddlebags and barding.

“Ah got this one,” Calamity called out, soaring into the air, Spitfire’s Thunder strapped across his back, intent on going one-on-one with the Pinkie Pie Balloon. From behind a mailbox, Velvet Remedy focused on invoking her shield spell, bringing it to brief life between our pegasus and the slaver ponies who turned their guns to fire at him.

The moment their guns were trained away from me, I dove around the trash barrel, slipping into S.A.T.S. and putting shots into the heads of three of them, courtesy of the zebra rifle. Their heads erupted in flame as they fell. Two more were doused in flickering green balefire that sent my PipBuck clicking. They stumbled, screaming, as Pyrelight flew over the slavers.

I could hear shots exchanged above.

The slaver pony who had been hiding behind the slave wagon, a lavender and green unicorn mare, wrapped the remains of Knight Boom in a levitation field and floated it towards herself. S.A.T.S. died only to activate again, partially refreshed. I looked down the scope of the zebra rifle, but couldn’t get a clear shot with the wagon of slaves in the way. They were cringing, trapped in the open. I saw one tan-coated mare mouth “don’t shoot me!”

Wait… what was I thinking? I focused, wrapping the entire wagon in a field of my own, and gently hauled the slaver’s cover out of my way.

One of the other slaver ponies opened fire at me, forcing me to dive back behind cover. I felt the levitation field slip, but caught it before I dropped the wagon full of helpless ponies.

A hoot and a flash of green flame announced the death of the slaver pinning me.

I turned to look back into the street just in time to see the lavender and green unicorn floating Knight Boom’s rocket launcher and firing a rocket through the display window of the store where the wounded Steel Ranger had taken cover. The storefront blew out in smoke and rubble. A moment later, the Ranger mare with the light machinegun tore at least a dozen holes in the unicorn slaver.

The unique sound of Calamity’s battle saddle rang through the air, coupled with an explosion. “Hoo-rah!” The pegasus swooped down to hover over me. “Ya see that? Shot the grenade right outta her mouth! While doin’ a triple summersault dodge!” He pumped a hoof in the air. “Who’s the best shot in the Equestrian Wasteland?”

I waved a hoof at him, urging him to take cover. A crackling whooooosh sound filled the air. My shadow leaped across the ground as the sky above us suddenly lit up.

Pointing at his breast, Calamity indulged in a bit of gloating. “Winner o’ the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years runnin’, that’s who!”

“Oh dear,” Velvet said, staring up into the air from behind her mailbox. Her face was painted with flickering light.

I felt a splash of dread. Calamity, still hovering in the air above me, turned his face upward, his voice trailing off.

He was watching, astonished, as the Pinkie Pie Balloon was consumed in flame. His mouth hung open. “Flammable gas?” he finally mouthed. “The fuckin’ slavers fill their dirigibles w’ flammable gas?”

Apparently.

“Littlepip… Calamity…” Velvet whimpered, waving for our attention. “It’s falling our way!” I knew I should move, but the holocaust above transfixed me. Bits of burning material started to rain down around us. My trance was broken when a blazing swath of thick cloth landed on the trash barrel next to me, draping it in flame.

Celestia clop my clit with a hoof-full of sunfire!

"RUN!"

I dove round the bullet-filled trash barrel, running down the street as fast as my short legs could take me. The light above was getting brighter and I could feel waves of heat pushing down at us.

"Ah didn't know. How could Ah have known?" Calamity shot past me. "What fuckin' psycho pony would do that?

The imprisoned ponies turned towards the inferno in the sky and screamed. The air burned in my throat. Mercifully, I still had my levitation field around the wagon. I floated it off the ground, towing it with me as I galloped down the shattered street, trying to put distance between all of us and the massive ball of fire (shaped like Pinkie Pie's head) that was slowly crashing to the earth.

* * *

I gave a prayer of thanks to Celestia and Luna. All of my companions had survived. Two of the Steel Rangers, however, had not.

"Why?" the paladin mare asked as I unlocked the wagon to set the captive ponies free.

I looked to her in surprise. I started to ask what she meant, only to recall Homage's words of warning about the Steel Rangers:

Honestly, most of them would be more interested in saving your PipBuck than saving you.

I realized the Steel Rangers probably engaged the slavers for a motivation completely different than my own. The revelation tasted sour.

"Because it's the right thing to do. And because, if I was in their place," I said, remembering that at one time I had been, "I would want somepony to do the same for me."

Velvet Remedy's ears perked. She listened in on our conversation as she moved to give aid and comfort to the ponies who had been trapped in that wagon cage for what looked (and smelt) like weeks. They were malnourished, scarred and had slept in their own filth. One of the ponies was dead, had been long enough to begin to smell, but the slavers hadn't bothered removing the corpse. I felt a simmering rage.

Turning from the sight, I stared into the impassive mask of the Steel Ranger. "Why did you?"

"The more Red Eye's forces advance, the more ground we lose," the senior paladin explained. "He covets the technology of the past that is rightfully ours to protect. We cannot engage his army directly, so we attack his supply lines."

Part of me wanted to scream at the metal-clad pony about her priorities. Instead, I scowled at the news; I had not expected the outskirts of Fillydelphia to be a war zone.

"Fillydelphia was home to major hubs for both the Ministry of Wartime Technology and the Ministry of Morale. But we lost our Hub to Red Eye's forces three years ago, and have been forced to fortify in a secondary position."

My scowl increased. "Any imminent plans to take it back?"

I felt the Steel Ranger mare glare at me behind her mask. Presumably, she was taking me to their fortification, so there was no cause not to tell me about it; but that freedom of information did not extend to anything tactical.

SteelHooves, however, stepped up and answered. “No.” I heard the mare nicker, bristling inside her armor, but SteelHooves didn’t care. “Why should we. By now, the building has been stripped of anything worth reclaiming.”

Stepping closer to me, SteelHooves demanded, “Come with me. I wish to talk with you alone.”

Perfect, because I wanted to talk to him.

* * *

“Why are you with us?”

We were in the burned-out husk of a small diner. SteelHooves remained, as always, hidden and expressionless behind his armor.

“And not that hogwash about having nothing better to do this time,” I demanded. Once we were alone, leader-SteelHooves had vanished. Once again, I was inexplicably in charge. Only this time, I really wanted to be. “You said you were on assignment. *What* assignment?”

SteelHooves’ tail swayed. “Remember when you eavesdropped on my conversation with Calamity? The picture I painted of you and your friends?”

I nodded tightly. He surprised me with his next words.

“I don’t believe any of that,” he told me. “You’re not a spy or a secret agent of some Ministry of Awesome black ops stable. You’re a good pony who is a victim of her own good nature and incessant curiosity.”

Sitting on his haunches, SteelHooves continued, “In my assessment, you have survived through luck, growing skill, and the unusual fortune of having capable friends who are willing to stick by you even when you are amazingly stupid.”

Well gee, thanks.

“I follow you because you are a better pony than I am. And you remind me of somepony else. You honestly strive to help and protect other ponies. I believe…” He paused. There was a hitch in his voice. “I believe she would have approved of you.”

SteelHooves dug a hoof at the red and black tiles, charred and shattered, that covered the floor.

“I told you before, not every Steel Ranger has the same view of our Oath. I have always believed that we should follow in the example of our Ministry’s Mare, Applejack. That we should be pledged to her goals and priorities. That we should protect other ponies, both with our technology and our fortitude. We weren’t meant to steal and hoard. We were meant to defend.”

I nodded slowly.

“I haven’t been faithful to my Oath for a long time. But at your side, I can be again.”

I looked away, the ghoul’s words sinking in. When I turned back, I fixed him with a stare. “That was the most heartwarming cart of horseapples I have ever heard.”

He stopped digging. “It’s the truth.”

“Of course it is,” I said, “That’s how you lie. If you recall, I’ve seen you do it before.” I started walking around the Steel Ranger as he continued to sit. “You tell enough truth that anypony would buy your story. But here's where the saddle rubs: all of that assessment had to have happened after you insinuated yourself into our group. If anything, you just explained why you are *still* with us." I stopped in front of him and pointed. "So I ask again. Why. Are you. Here?"

"All right," SteelHooves nickered, standing up. Repeating his words almost verbatim, "Do you remember when you eavesdropped on my conversation with Calamity? The picture I painted of you and your friends?" Again I nodded.

"That's what my Elder believes you are. And my assignment is to assess the potential threat that you and the other residents of the Stable you come from represent."

* * *

No more secrets. That was my condition for not abandoning SteelHooves. He responded by giving me the box of memory orbs as a token of submission. I had not expected that, but he insisted. After all, we both knew I really couldn't just take his word.

I focused on one of them, showing him trust in return by allowing myself to become helpless in his company. The world melted away.

* * *

I was wet. Rain was coming down in sheets from the blackness of the night sky. I was wearing a rain-slicker, but the wind buffeted at it, pulling it away. Only the top of my mane was remotely dry under the hood.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the pegasus landing platform, over two dozen floors above the bustling lights of the city below. I recognized the form of a giant scooter hovering over a well-lit building in the distance. This was Manehattan.

"Sure ya want ta be flyin' on a night like this, Applesnack, sir?" a dapperly-dressed grey pegasus buck asked as he shimmied himself into the harness of a sky chariot. It was a particularly beautiful chariot, adorned with a very familiar three-apples design.

"Very important business," I heard myself say in Applesnack's voice. "Has to be tonight."

"Well, that's whatcha pay me for, right?" the pegasus smiled. "Although it's likely ta be a beastly ride."

"I'll survive," Applesnack said as lightning flashed across the sky.

The pegasus gripped the harness strap in his teeth and pulled, drawing it tight. "An' how's Miss Applejack? I was really sorry ta hear 'bout her accident. The ponies who were supposed ta be keeping those elevators in top shape ought ta be sent ta jail."

I felt my jaw tighten. But Applesnack kept his voice pleasantly even. "Strapped in tight, Wingright?" I both felt and heard him ask. "Don't want you slipping free in the rain now."

"Yeah," the pegasus laughed. "That would be one unpleasant fall."

Applesnack stepped into the chariot, pressing as far forward as he could as if afraid he might slip out the back the moment the pegasus launched forward. The grey pegasus spread his wings, rain dripping off of the feathers.

Applesnack moved with alarming speed. I felt myself lurch forward, biting down, grasping the pegasus' wing in my teeth. My host drew back, pulling, drawing the wing back over the metal front edge of the chariot as he raised up a hoof.

"Applesnack! Whatcha…?" the pegasus squeaked in surprise before I felt my hoof come down on that pulled wing with a bone-crunching blow. The pegasus screamed!

Spitting out the feathers of Wingright's now-crippled wing, SteelHooves growled, his low voice like thunder. "Only three ponies knew exactly when Applejack was going to be riding up that elevator!"

"Aaaah! My wing! My *wing!* What the hell…?!"

"I checked your finances. Your account got a sudden influx of coins three weeks ago. And an even bigger one less than eight hours after Applejack's accident!" I was staring into the widening eyes of the blubbering pegasus. My voice was dangerous low. My heartbeat wasn't raised at all. "Really, you should choose something other than your filly's middle name as a password."

"I-I can explain!" the pegasus wailed, cradling his shattered wing. "My sister died in the war. That was an inheritance!"

"I don't think so." Applesnack turned and stepped down off the chariot. Then I felt as my host lifted his back hooves and planted them against the rear of the chariot. Slowly, he began to shove, pushing it across the rain-slicked rooftop and the hapless pegasus along with it.

"What?! No! What are you doing? Don't!" the pegasus cried out, trying feebly to push back as he was shoved closer and closer to the edge.

"Please! I have a family!"

SteelHooves grunted, stopping. "Maybe you should have thought of them before you made your choice." He gave a final, hard buck to the back end of the chariot, sending it toppling over the lip of the roof, pegasus and all.

I could hear the winged pony scream right up until the chariot bounced off the first outcropping on its way down to the streets below.

I felt utterly stunned, numb, as my host's legs carried me towards the nearest door at a casual, splashing trot. I felt him rehearsing under his breath,

"There's been a terrible accident. No, I have no idea where he was flying in from. I could tell he was coming in too low, but I expected him to pull up before he hit the building. It was horrible. I feel it was my fault; I shouldn't have asked Wingright to fly in this weather. I should have known that the wind sheer would be too much for him."

* * *

The memory ended.

I stared at SteelHooves in horror.

He stared back calmly. "No secrets."

"…We are not primitive tribals, striking our hooves against stone, hoping to create fire. We are building a better tomorrow for our children. And our children's children.

> *"We build it through the sweat and blood we spill to restore the foundations of industry to our great nation. Because without industry, there is no progress. And we are not content to allow another two hundred years to go by with ponykind reduced to scavengers!"*

Red Eye's speech ended, his voice replaced by what sounded like carnival music.

Twilight was descending over Fillydelphia when we crested a small hill and I could glean where we were heading.

Nearly two-thirds of Fillydelphia had been cut off, sealed up from the ruins beyond by a great metal wall. The bulk of the industrial center, the amusement park whose roller coaster towered in the fading light, and Fillydelphia Crater itself all hid inside. Not only did towers just inside the wall harbor guardponies, but griffins patrolled the skies around. The glaring dirigibles above provided additional sniper cover.

The "secondary position" of the Steel Rangers was obvious: the largest and most defendable building still intact outside of the wall. The massive, gear-shaped emblem on the front of the building proclaimed what it had been even better than the crumbling, two-story letters that cut through it. The Steel Rangers had taken over the headquarters of Stable-Tec and converted it into a citadel.

Calamity flew casually past me to hover near SteelHooves.

"So, ya ain't an elder cuz ya chose not t' be?" he asked curiously. "Maybe we ain't so different after all."

I felt ice water run down my spine.

SteelHooves turned to Calamity, studying the rust-colored pegasus for a moment. "No. *You* flew towards your responsibilities in defiance of your own kind, heedless and ignorant of the consequences."

Calamity flapped backwards a bit, a frown forming across on his face.

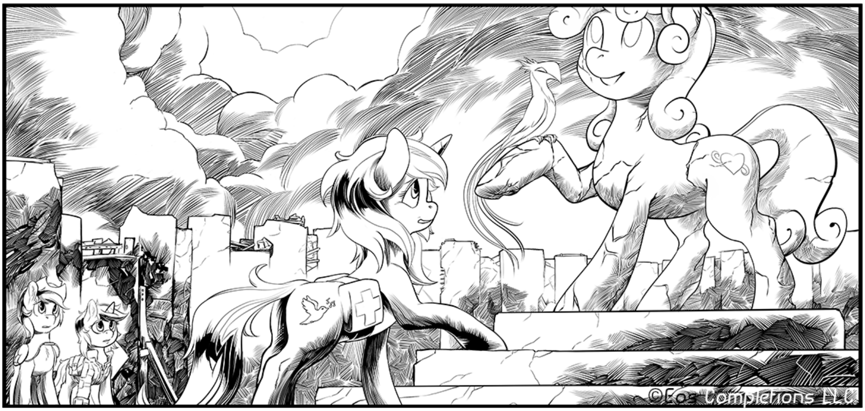
SteelHooves continued. "I ran away from my responsibilities because I understood exactly what the consequences would be if I did not. I knew there were ponies who would follow my example, and I was not willing to risk a civil war amongst the Steel Rangers."

Turning away from Calamity, SteelHooves said firmly, "We are nothing alike."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Tough Hide (level two) – The brutal experiences of the Equestrian Wasteland have hardened you. You gain +3 to Damage Threshold for each level of this perk you take.

Dances of Light and Shadow



"Mmm! I can smell the muffins baking now!"

* * *

Death.

The battlefield was strewn with bloody corpses under a charcoal-grey sky that heaved and threatened rain.

I was dying. Or, more precisely, my host was dying. And, trapped in his memory, I was along for the ride. Part of my mind remained coherent enough to wonder about that. I could feel the press of metal against my host's head, a helmet which could easily hold a recollector. Was I going to experience death?

The rest of my mind was overloaded by the pain that tore at my abdomen. My host had fallen against the wall of the trench, head propped up just enough to see that most of his body below the stomach was no longer as attached as it should be. I could see his intestines and internal organs spilling out onto the recently dug dirt. Mercifully, I couldn't feel that… my host had lost all feeling below the top of the wound.

He was already dead. He must have known it, but his body just hadn't gotten the message yet.

Who was I? I had assumed this was Applesnack's memory, since it came from one of the orbs in his memory case. But that seemed unlikely now. Between the armored barding and the blood, I couldn't be sure.

Several pegasi flew back and forth over the battlefield, searching, relaying messages or calling out names. For a moment, a familiar sky-blue mare with her shockingly brilliant rainbow mane and tail swooped over my trench. She hovered, looking about frantically. Her blood-stained purple suit looked nearly black in the light and her battle saddle was scorched. Her eyes fell on me and she winced. Then she was off again.

"Hey!" The large form of a particularly statuesque red stallion in similar military barding slid down into the trench next to me. His eyes went wide as he took in the morbid reality of my wounds.

"So… Sarge… we drive those striped bastards back?" I felt my muzzle move, and the words came out in a low, masculine voice.

I felt a drop of wetness hit our cheek. At first, I thought the other pony was crying. But then another raindrop fell out of the sky, and another, and another.

"Ayep," the red pony nodded, wisps of orange mane fell from under his helmet, caked a dark red by blood. He spoke slowly, "Ya did good, soldier. Mighty good. They'll make ya Sergeant after this." Rain was beginning to soak into his coat, washing caked blood out of it.

My host choked, coughing up blood. The taste was warm and coppery in our mouth. "Post mortem, I'm afraid, Sarge." My host's voice was eerily calm and even. He had minutes left to live, if that. And he seemed… at peace with it. "I'm afraid I won't be joining you when you go after all."

We felt cold. A chill deeper than that from the rain. I felt drops of rain kissing the seeringly painful wound. I was thankful I couldn't feel drops landing *inside* me.

"Don't talk," the big one said, looking deeply wounded. "Ah ain't ready t' let ya go, buck."

"Think the zebras had different to say." My god, my host actually chuckled. He was in utter agony… I hadn't felt pain like this since the dragon set me on fire; I was sure that my own body was screaming… and he just chuckled. Like it was nothing. "Don't worry, Sarge. We won the day, right? No regrets…"

The big red stallion looked like he was fighting tears. My host just grinned, his muzzle full of his own blood. "…Well, one regret. Never did get to meet that hot sister of yours."

The stallion frowned dangerously, and I suddenly realized that his mane was the same color as Applejack's coat. And they had similar freckles. Big Macintosh bristled, then burst into a gruff laugh. "Now ya got t' pull through," he grinned, "So's Ah c'n buck yer backside, boy!"

It was too late. Darkness was already creeping into the edges of my host's vision. The reaper pony had come to take him home. Wherever home was before Celestia and Luna were goddesses. My host tilted his head back, staring into the darkening sky, feeling the rain on his face for one last time…

A flock of pegasi soared in from overhead, two of them pulling a passenger wagon full of other ponies, mostly unicorns. All the newcomers wore barding of yellow and pink and carried saddleboxes with little butterflies on them, just like Velvet Remedy's. All except the lead pony. She didn't need the uniform… Fluttershy already *was* the uniform.

"um… oh… Oh dear!" The shy pegasus pony looked out over the hills and trenches full of dead and dying. Her eyes filled with tears and she began to tremble. But she stomped a hoof down, and forced herself to find her voice. "Oh… okay. Everypony, everyone… please be calm. We're going to help."

Fluttershy turned and called out to her team, "Please, if you would, take your positions. And hurry. Thank you."

Seeping shadows had nearly engulfed my host's vision, and his other senses were fading fast. I was looking at the world from the bottom of a deep, dark well. Thankfully, the pain was at the top of the well, far away from us. We closed our eyes.

It was hard to open them again. Our eyelids were heavy, like they were made of gold. When we did, there wasn't much to see. Just clouds and rain. Barely visible. We were in a much deeper well.

Fluttershy's head moved between us and the clouds, looking strangely upside-down, cringing at the sight of my host. "Ooooh… Oh no." She dashed up to us. "I… we… I think we can help. Just, please, hold on!"

We strained to speak. It only came out as a whisper. "…bit beyond you. Go help the… *ponies* who can…" Our words trailed off. There was no more energy to put behind them. That was enough, hopefully, to get the point across.

A unicorn in a yellow and pink dress stepped into view. "Fluttershy," she said, her voice the whisper of a whisper, "We're ready for the test run…"

The world faded to black. A black that was all-encompassing. No sight. No sound. Nothing to smell or feel. Even the taste of blood was gone from our mouth.

We were dead.

We should have been dead.

But a pleasant warmth was spreading through us. I could feel it all the way to my host's tail. The world came rushing back like we were being released from a memory orb. There was no pain. It was replaced by the bone-deep chill. Our body was soaked in rain. The trench had become squishy with mud.

We opened our eyes. Our body was healed. Complete.

It was a miracle. It was *impossible!*

"What did you do?!" I heard a mare's voice cry out from above. I looked up to see the rainbow-maned mare dive out of the sky, a rainbow-colored wake stretching out behind her. "Fluttershy! What. Did. You. *Do?!"*

Rainbow Dash stopped, hovering in the air, staring in utter shock at her fellow pegasus.

"We healed them," Fluttershy said graciously, her voice somehow filled with happiness but not a hint of pride. Several of her unicorns were trotting up to stand by her side.

"I know that," Rainbow Dash assured her. "But… how?"

Fluttershy blushed, looking pleased. "We call it a 'megaspell'."

Rainbow Dash blinked. "A what now?"

One of the unicorns cleared her throat and Fluttershy took a meek step back, allowing the mare to explain. "It's a new, underlying spell framework that allows smaller spells to be augmented in scope and intensity."

The blue pegasus looked lost. And worried.

"This way," Fluttershy claimed, "We can heal everyone on the battlefield with a single spell. No one has to die because we couldn't get to them in time."

"Every…" Rainbow Dash turned her stare over the battlefield. My host did too. Everywhere, ponies were getting to their feet with expressions of awe and bewilderment. Only the dead remained dead, their corpses strewn across the hills and filling the trenches. The wounded, even those at the very brink of death from impossible wounds, were healthy and whole.

Like my host.

"…all of them?…"

And like the zebra who was pulling herself from amongst the bodies, a zebra sword clutched in her mouth, crackling with electrical fire.

Rainbow Dash shouted at Fluttershy, "You healed everyone!? Indiscriminately? Even the zebras!?!"

"um…"

"Do you know what you've done!??"

"I… we…"

"Do you know how many ponies ***died*** *here today?"* Rainbow Dash bellowed. *"And now we have to fight the damn battle all over again!"*

I could hear the yellow pegasus squeak, beginning to cry. My heart broke at the sound. I wanted Applesnack to turn towards her… I wanted him to comfort the mare who had just saved his life. But he didn't even spare her a glance. Instead, my host lowered his head, sinking his teeth into mud to pull up his rifle, ignoring the slimy texture and earthy taste.

Shots began to sound across the battlefield outside the trench.

"Fluttershy, get down!" Rainbow Dash cried out a moment before the blue pegasus tackled the yellow one, sending them both rolling into the trench next to me, her wing catching the wake of a missile as it shot over the trench and exploded, raining dirt down on us.

The battle was engaged. Again.

* * *

Velvet Remedy stopped as we approached the massive gate that the Steel Rangers had built in front of Stable-Tec Headquarters. The armored plate looked like it had been taken from a battleship's hull. It was slid down into grooves in a concrete wall that bisected what had once been the squat skyscraper's courtyard.

Steel Rangers stood guard along the roof and in the open half of the courtyard, accompanied by two of the tank-like sentinel robots that had ironically helped prompt the creation of the anti-machine rifle.

This outer half-courtyard was a mess of cracked steps and shattered cobblestones, concrete planters where nothing grew, and a dried fountain. Above the fountain rose a cracked and badly-weathered statue of a once-beautiful white unicorn with a curling purple and pink mane and tail. The statue had suffered from not only weather but generations of graffiti before the Steel Rangers had taken possession of the building and began fatally discouraging raiders and miscreants from approaching their base of operations.

Everypony else was focused on the guards in magically-powered armor and sentinel robot in front of the gate. The senior paladin mare trotted forward, addressing them. I perked my ears to listen, but felt a sudden hoof-nudge from Calamity. He pointed a hoof and turned to see Velvet Remedy walking up to the fountain.

"Hello, great grandmother," she said softly. "Great, great, great, great, great…" She paused, blushing. "I've sung your song. And I just wanted to say: you saved us. I'm here because of you. Stable Two worked."

The Steel Rangers had quieted, themselves strangely interested in my friend's almost internal conversation with the statue. Calamity moved away from us, flying quietly towards her.

"You got it right." Velvet dug at the ground. "I… just wanted you to know." There was a tear in her eye as she turned and stepped away, moving to rejoin us. Calamity landed next to her, wrapping a foreleg about her in comfort.

Velvet Remedy stopped, leaned into the embrace, and sniffed once. Then broke away, wiping a tear, and returned to her place behind me.

Pyrelight fluttered out of the sky and landed on the statue, causing the Steel Rangers to fall into battle stances.

"At ease," SteelHooves rumbled. I was willing to bet that, behind his mask, he had rolled his eyes.

"Those things are dangerous," one of the knights explained.

I chuckled grimly to myself. "Yeah, she might lift your visor and breathe, baking you." The mental image was grotesque – having seen a pony killed cruelly like that was horrifying – but somehow the image of Pyrelight pulling the same trick struck my funny bone. Goddesses, there really was something wrong with me.

The knight mare next to me (the one with the machine gun battle saddle) giggled in her armor. "You can't lift the visor in these helmets." She turned to me, "That would be a serious weak point in the armor. I can't imagine such a design getting through the Shield Committee."

I didn't know exactly what she was talking about, but I gleaned the general idea. "It wouldn't," I agreed, "If protection was the primary goal of the armor."

"What other purpose could *armor* have?" she scoffed.

"Intimidation."

Behind us, Calamity had flown up to look Pyrelight in the eyes. "Ya crap on it, an' she'll kill ya. Fair warnin'."

A sky-rending squeal tore the air. Above us, the giant arm of a crane swung into view from behind the wall. The massive steel talons on the end of it lowered and grasped onto the metal gate. Slowly, with the tortured cry of metal grinding on concrete, the gate to the Steel Ranger's citadel in Stable-Tec Headquarters lifted to allow us access.

"Poppyseed," the knight mare next to me said.

"Hm?" I blinked, confused.

"My name," she said. "I'm Knight Poppyseed." At my continued blank expression, she expounded, "Poppies are a flower from zebra lands. They have seeds."

"Oh." I smiled back. "Littlepip." I lifted my right foreleg, showing off my PipBuck. "Pip is short for PipBuck," I told her, choosing to conveniently forget my name was my mother's play on 'pipsqueak'. "All the ponies in the Stables have them." Even as I said that, I wondered if that was true considering the often-fatal strangeness of other Stable-Tec stables. I looked beyond the lifting gate, a sudden lump in my throat. "…well, in my Stable, at least."

“Really?” Poppyseed commented. “I’d always heard that to pip somepony meant to shoot that pony with a firearm.” I had never heard that before. And really, what do you say to that?

The rest of us started to move forward. Pyrelight seemed intent on staying outside in the Fillydelphia outskirts. I wished her well, expecting she would still be nearby when and if we left. She had survived on her own for a long time. I was more concerned about the rest of us.

Calamity looked back at the base of the statue, bent his head forward and snatched a bottle cap out of the dry fountain bed. He flew back to us, taking his place walking at Velvet’s side, dropping the cap into one of his saddlebags as he did so.

⁂

The sounds of sporadic gunfire danced in the air. Steel Rangers trotted laps around a track running along the towering wall which encircled the lower floors of Stable-Tec Headquarters. In the inner half-court, a senior paladin was barking orders at initiates as they struggled to master movement in their suits of magically-powered armor.

“Ah get it,” Calamity said to SteelHooves as one of the initiates bucked at a badly dented steel plate, leaving hoofmarks nearly half a yard from her intended target. “Yer armor’s spell matrix enhances yer strength an’ endurance t’ compensate fer the bulk o’ it, right?”

SteelHooves nodded without a word.

“Interestin’,” Calamity mused. “The enchantments in an Enclave suit negate its weight. Kinda like one o’ the enchantments on Spitfire’s Thunder.” SteelHooves glanced back at the unique anti-machine rifle strapped to Calamity’s battle saddle. The thing was almost twice as long as he was when fully assembled, so he kept it broken down while traveling. “Differn’t approaches, but still… it’s all about keepin’ the weight down.”

SteelHooves had slowed, staring at Calamity. This was the first time he had witnessed Calamity’s freaky knowledge of magical engineering, rarely seen as it was.

The senior paladin mare led us up the steps to the once-grand doors of Stable-Tec. What had once been gleaming, polished bronze inlaid with richly varnished wood was now tarnished and discolored metal with inserts of warped and rotting timber. Above the door, the gear-shaped Stable-Tec logo was embedded into a mantel over a pair of decorative nooks where fires had once burned. Ashes from the nooks had stained the wall and doors below in streaks, making the building look like it had been crying.

I shuddered, feeling a chill.

Cocking his ear towards the gunshots, Calamity asked SteelHooves, “Ah take it that’s a shootin’ range out back. If your friends here ain’t inclined t’ kick us out or shoot us anytime pressin’, think Ah could take a few turns at it?”

“Trying to impress the Rangers?” our ghoul companion retorted.

Calamity laughed. “Hell no. That ain’t it a’tall.”

I trotted closer, my own curiosity waking. “What then? Surely the four-year-running sharpshooting champion doesn’t need lessons. I’ve never seen you miss…”

Velvet Remedy snarked, “Even when he was supposed to.”

“…so why the shooting range?”

The leading mare had stopped at the front door and was speaking to somepony on the other side through an intercom. Poppyseed trotted in place next to me, looking anxious. Or bored. Hard to tell without being able to see an expression.

"Y'see, this new gun, Spitfire's Thunder, is a magically enhanced anti-machine gun. Made fer a pegasus sniper." Calamity tipped the brim of his hat forward. "It's enchanted so's to weigh only a few pounds an' t' have only a feather-brush of a kick. Fires more like a magical-energy weapon than a firearm. Even has a lightnin' gem fuelin' her insides – that's why she sounds like thunder when she's shot. She fires probably twenty percent faster than the non-magical model and won't never jam. No moving parts."

Now it was my turn to whistle.

"Alla which means she's more magical energy rifle than firearm. But she still uses bullets, just like muh battle saddle. An' bullets are subject t' wind and gravity. So that makes for an odd combination." He smiled to me then looked frankly at SteelHooves. "An' that means Ah best get some love in with her on the firin' range before takin' her inta battle proper."

The door into Stable-Tec was opened from the inside.

Velvet Remedy pushed past us, rolling her eyes and tossing her mane. "Do you and your gun need some alone time?" she shot as she passed Calamity.

He blinked. "Well, yeah. That's what Ah jus' said."

I facehoofed. Velvet Remedy nickered and trotted inside, ignoring the confused pegasus.

* * *

> *"Does the news today make you anxious? Worried about what might happen to yourself or your family should the megaspells fall? I know and understand your fears because I share them…"*

My companions and I looked around, startled. The lobby of Stable-Tec had been designed to be a welcoming self-advertisement. The sad, sweet voice seemed to come from right in front of us, no matter which way were were facing. It filled the air.

"That's Sweetie Belle," Velvet Remedy whispered, searching for the speakers.

> *"Like you, I hope for the best… but like you, I need to prepare for the worst. I want a safe place for my loved ones to survive if that horrible day should ever come where our beautiful Equestria falls beneath a megaspell holocaust."*

"It's automated," Poppyseed told me. "Starts up every time we go through that door. Didn't use to, but then we tried to disable it. Only made it worse." She pointed to the large Stable-Tec logo embedded in the floor. "There used to be an image standing there of that unicorn from the statue out front. Made out of dancing lights – looked like a damn ghost. Killing that also killed the interface for the tour presentation." She giggled wryly inside her armor. "Enjoy."

Explained why neither our guide nor the Steel Rangers milling about seemed to be paying the voice of Sweetie Belle even the slightest bit of attention.

> *"I too need to know my family will be safe. But more than that, I want them to be happy. I don't want them locked away in a dark, cramped shelter for the rest of their lives. That's no better than a prison. No… I want my family to be safe and secure*

inside one of Stable-Tec's magnificent Stables."

Our guide lead us past display cases, most of which were destroyed and the displays plundered, and framed posters on the wall, all badly faded. The posters ranged from terrifying portents of armageddon (all of which somehow managed to be more wholesome and pleasant than the post-apocalyptic reality they attempted to prophesy) to pictures of a smiling Sweetie Belle urging parents to trust their children to Stable-Tec's promise of long and happy lives. All of them had a unifying message, although rarely put into these exact words: We care. You need us. You will die without us. Buy your tickets for the Stable-Tec lottery now.

We were approaching the end of a hallway, passing a pristine Sparkle~Cola machine (this one with a large, back-lit plate showing an orgasmic Fluttershy drinking her favorite carrot-flavored drink) and an ammunition vending machine which had been broken into and thoroughly looted. The end of the hall was adorned in false rocks, so the hallway would appear to transform into a small, darkened cave. The illusion would have been effective if chunks of plaster from the "cave wall" hadn't broken loose, revealing the wire mesh beneath.

As our leader stepped into the cave, loud clunking vibrations echoed through the hall and display lights came on, revealing a huge mock-up of a Stable door.

Sweetie Belle's voice came to life around us again, the recording playing at a strangely low speed for the first few seconds, making her voice briefly sound similar to SteelHooves'.

> *"Stable-Tec welcomes you to our new line of subterranean stables, featuring our patented S.A.S. arcano-technology. S.A.S. technology is the product of years of dedicated, uncompromising effort by our Stable-Tec scientists to bring you the most advanced and enduring designs based on the three pillars of post-apocalyptic survival: Safety, Amenities and Sustainability."*

Velvet Remedy and I exchanged looks.

The mock-Stable door (numbered "0") swung open on hinges as we approached while a soundtrack played the sounds of an actual Stable door being pulled open. Spinning yellow lights topped off the simulation, something that hadn't been present in Stable Two.

> *"You and your loved ones will be able to sleep in peace, knowing that our impenetrable Stable doors are built to survive and protect even if zebra invaders detonate a Balefire Bomb directly outside of your new, safe and secure home. (With only a projected seven-percent failure rate under even those extreme and unlikely circumstances.) Stable-Tec's mighty Stable doors are guaranteed to protect you and your family."*

Wow.

Velvet Remedy stifled a giggle. Before I could stop myself, I whispered "Velvet Remedy's barn door doesn't swing that way." I gasped and quickly corrected myself, "I meant, Stable Two's." Too late. The charcoal-coated unicorn with the scarlet and gold streaks in her white mane was fixing me with a stare that told me I wouldn't be hearing the last of this for a long, uncomfortable time. Dammit, sometimes I hated my mother. Not that my slip-of-the-tongue was really her fault… but it was her fault.

> *"Still thinking of that dark, cramped cellar that you feared would be your family's*

> *home? Let the magical light of S.A.S. technology burn those fears away! Through the magical power of your Stable's appointed Overmare, each Stable will enjoy fully realistic sunlight even underground, with all the warmth and joy it brings," Sweetie Belle's voice boasted. "And at night, a softer light will fill the halls, provided through enduring earth pony technology."*

So far, the most accurate part of the exhibit was the hall lighting with it's ever-present, high-pitched whine. Of course this "night-time lighting" had been sixteen hours a day, every day, all the time. The realistic sunlight promised through the Overmare had been reserved for the underground apple orchard. And based on the color and taste of the things we had called apples, I had my doubts about how "fully realistic" it was.

> *"Concerned about security? Fear not. Each Stable is supplied with a security level and a fully-stocked armory. Our 'Friendly Pie' camera system allows the Overmare to keep an eye on every pony in public areas, without prying into your private affairs." Sweetie Belle's disembodied voice seemed especially pleased with this feature. "We here at Stable-Tec believe in returning your life to the level of respectful privacy that you deserve without compromising your safety."*

We began to trudge through the bizarre mock-Stable. Its layout was nothing like the real thing, designed more like an amusement park ride than a functional shelter. Every few yards we would pass a large window. As our leader approached, lights would flicker on inside eternally sealed rooms where mannequins would play out scenes of utopian underground life. With each room we passed, Sweetie Belle's ghost would regale us with some other aspect of how wonderful and safe living in a Stable would be.

After the other Stables I had been in, I found that this was creeping me out. I couldn't stop thinking about how so many Stables had apparently turned into lethal traps, very not like these promises. Somehow, the reaction I saw on Calamity's face made it even worse.

> *"Here at Stable-Tec, we have taken the time to think of everything. We know that, in the event of the worst kind of megaspell cataclysm, it may take Equestria not months but decades to recover. Those of us who choose to survive the destruction may have to live most of the rest of our lives underground and see a new generation born without knowing the world outside. So each Stable includes a Stable-Tec Apple Orchard, providing not only more than enough food for a growing underground community, but complete with grass for your children's hooves and mist fountains to simulate rainbows, run off one of our patented S.A.S. water talismans."*

Did other Stables run out of food? Stable Two's Apple Orchard was, simply put, vast. Which may explain why the rest of the Stable never enjoyed magical sunlight. Did Stable-Tec actually design the other Stables with orchards that could only support a generation or two of growth? Or was Sweetie Belle purposefully downplaying the horrors that she and her two friends anticipated?

> *"Of course, we all hope and pray that these Stables will never be needed. But can any of us afford to take that gamble and not seek a place of safety and joy for our loved ones and ourselves?"*

Velvet Remedy seemed on the verge of tears at the parting words of her ancestor whom we both knew had become the first Overmare of Stable Two – the Stable whose special purpose was to keep us down there, safe, forever.

Or, I knew, until Spike could find the right ponies to cast *Gardens of Equestria.*

"Ah can't believe you lived yer whole lives in a place like that," Calamity said as we walked up the steps that lead out of the exhibit. "Ah mean, one that actually worked. This… explains so much."

I opened my mouth, but couldn't find words. Only a little squeak escaped.

> *"We here at Stable-Tec hope you've enjoyed the tour today. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask at the lobby desk. One of our friendly staff would love to tell you everything you need to know."*

* * *

We were made to wait in the long hall of rotting wood paneling outside Elder Blueberry Sabre's office, under the watchful glares of armor-encased ponies, as SteelHooves spoke with the Elder in private.

I tried to engage Poppyseed in conversation. That worked until I misstepped by asking what she thought of the Steel Ranger's Oath, wondering whether she felt the same way as Knight Buck had about following Applejack's principles. What I learned instead was that talking of the Oath to outsiders (or 'tribals' as she called us) was forbidden. After that, she ignored all my further efforts to chat. I couldn't tell if it was because I had deeply offended the knight, or because there were other Steel Rangers watching.

I contemplated trying to eavesdrop, but then realized the guards wouldn't let me close enough to the door. And I wasn't entirely sure I wanted to know what was being said. I was sure there were some elements of the conversation that I would do well to hear, particularly anything regarding us or SteelHooves' mission. But there was probably more than a bit of discussion about internal politics and current affairs within the Steel Rangers. Such things were none of my business; and after entering one of SteelHooves' memories without permission, I didn't want to stick my hoof into his affairs uninvited so soon again.

Furthermore, I found that I really didn't want to know. The Steel Rangers were… distasteful.

SteelHooves was a Steel Ranger. Not just a former member who still wore the armor because (for some reason I didn't quite understand) he couldn't remove it, but a current and still active part of the organization. A Star Paladin at that. Which, although I didn't quite know what that meant, sounded impressive.

Between this side-trip and the memories in his memory orbs, I was beginning to learn a lot about my newest companion. (Well, newest *four-hooved* companion.) And I found I could accept most of it, although not always easily. I felt I could trust him… within certain parameters… and call him a friend. But I did not envy his karma, and I was apprehensive about where his loyalties would fall if the hooves met the apple tree.

Learning about him had also meant learning about the Steel Rangers. I was interested in them as they connected to SteelHooves… and to Applejack, a mare in that special circle of friends whom Spike had personally known and whom I had grown to care about regardless of the centuries between us. The notion of defenders still sworn to the values of Applejack was like a light in the sea of darkness that the Equestrian Wasteland often seemed to be.

But the Steel Rangers themselves, or at least a great many of them, struck me as little better than well-equipped, more principled raiders. They didn't go about raping and torturing. No bodies hung mutilated from their walls. But they had no compunction about just sitting back and letting ponies suffer and starve and die when they had the technology to do some good. They were like Spike, only without the noble and self-sacrificing reason that justified their actions.

I frowned and turned my thoughts away from internal contemplation and back into the hallway. Having decided not to eavesdrop, I slipped my earbloom into one ear and tuned my PipBuck back into the Fillydelphia broadcast. But instead of Red Eye, I got another iteration of "March of the Parasprites". I looked towards my friends. Velvet Remedy and Calamity were sitting together, occasionally casting furtive glances at the door to Blueberry Sabre's office, as Velvet helped divorce Calamity from the more egregious misconceptions of Stable life that the tour had planted.

I contemplated joining the conversation, but I had missed a fair part of it, and both Poppyseed and the guards seemed more interested in them than me. So instead I sat, growing restless (bored). I stared at the pictures on the walls, tattered and age-darkened oil paintings of buildings. I recognized one of them, barely, as the Red Racer factory.

I got up and started to walk the hall, giving the paintings a closer examination. There were pedestals as well, set at regular intervals, each holding a small architectural model. Most of the models had collapsed, overcome by the weight of at least twenty decades. But a few were still standing, mostly intact – an amazing testament to the model builder.

When Stable-Tec built something, they built it to last.

I was just about to pull the earbloom from my ear when the current song ended (something both patriotic-sounding and yet heavy on the use of an oboe), and Red Eye's voice spoke into my ear.

> *"My friends, let me share with you a secret, just between you and me. I was not always like this. No, once I was a young colt, irresponsible and carefree. I did not understand the need to toil, to labor. Nor should I have. For I was but a child, and childhood is the time for innocence. For exploration. For happiness and growth.*
>
> *"I was lucky, fortunate beyond my deserving, to be blessed with safe places to roam, security from the fiends and horrors of the Equestrian Wasteland, and companionship in the form of my beloved dog, Winter. Oh, the adventures we had.*
>
> *"Sounds beautiful, doesn't it. A time of peace and joy that I can return to in my mind at the end of the day after the Equestrian Wasteland has thrown at me the worst of its horrors and despair. Between the visions of my peaceful past and our gloriously bright future, I find the strength to go on, no matter how hard the path or heavy the load.*
>
> *"But… my childhood, picturesque and ideal and safe… is that what your own children enjoy? Tell me, Equestrian Wasteland, how many of our children today are truly happy? Truly carefree?*
>
> *"Sadly, we both know the answer. None. Today, Equestria is a hard, miserable, unforgiving place. Our colts and fillies live with fear, violence, rape and death. The bleak and poisoned world offers our children only meaningless struggle and, all too often, a cruel and terrifying end. There is no joy out there, no hope.*
>
> *"No more! This ends here. This ends now. One day, yes, the New Equestria we are*

building will offer them that same utopian security that I once enjoyed… but we cannot wait for that while our children suffer. The leaders of our past may have forgotten how much each colt, each filly, is to be cherished when they unleashed their arrogant wrath upon our world, but we who have lived through hell know better. And we will not wait another day.

"As those living within lands already being reclaimed know, our nation's young ones are, and have always been, my highest priority. All that we sacrifice, we do for them, to give them a better place. And in the meantime, we strive to give them what safety and security our hooves can offer.

"And more than that, dear friends. Oh, much more. We provide schools where they can learn, medical centers where they will obtain free treatment – the best medical care in all of Equestria, and homes where they can live together with other children, making friends, all under the watchful care of loving, approved mares and stallions.

"Soon, the armies of the Children of Unity will come to your town. Not as an invading army, oh no. But as an army of engineers and teachers and doctors. They will rebuild your schools, establish hospitals that will provide the best care in this ruined and tortured nation, and bring to you the Words of the Goddess, so that you too may know Unity.

"And once again, our children will be able to play."

The door to Blueberry Sabre's office opened. SteelHooves took a step out.

"Littlepip, could you come in here for a moment?"

* * *

Elder Blueberry Sabre was the first Steel Ranger I had actually laid eyes on. She was a rather pretty older mare. I suspected that, when she was closer to my age (or even Velvet's), she must have been quite cute. She had a pleasant blue coat and her mane and tail had once been a berry purple before it turned mostly silver-grey. There were still a few wisps of the original color. I couldn't see her cutie mark; her robes concealed a modest portion of her body.

SteelHooves guided me in, closing the door behind him with his metal-sheathed tail. Blueberry Sabre stood in front of me beside a heavy iron table whose interlaced frontal design reminded me oddly of scaffolding. She had one hoof up on the table, although with a closer glance I could see that her hoof was not actually touching the metal surface. Trapped between hoof and desk was the round black ball of a memory orb.

"Littlepip," SteelHooves said, his voice oddly strained. "I need you to look into that orb and tell me what is inside there."

I looked at him, puzzled. Then at the Steel Ranger Elder. She nodded with a smirk that looked ugly on what should have been a pretty face.

"All right," I said, approaching slowly. I was a little surprised at my own hesitation. Something in the room just felt off. Still, I did as SteelHooves asked, lowering my horn towards the orb and focusing. I felt the odd washing sensation as reality slipped. Part of me panicked, suddenly thinking that they were incapacitating me. A memory of my own – that of Velvet Remedy shooting me with my own dart gun – flashed through my head.

And then I was no longer with them.

* * *

The first sense I gained was smell. Even before I could see the barn, I could smell the rich scent of hay, overlaid with other, less pleasant, earthy odors. Sight came next. I wanted to blink as dazzling sunlight, beautiful and pure, filtered into the barn through an open hayloft. Then came touch. First the touch of the cloak I was wearing, a rough but not unpleasant cloth. Then…

I felt odd.

The body I was in was different… but I couldn't really put my finger on how. I had been in earth ponies before; the lack of a horn was no longer startling to me. And the body was less alien than that of a horny male, much less my exceptionally freaky experience as Spike. But I still felt wrong somehow. And it was like an itch that wouldn't go away.

My host was standing in a bed of hay, watching as two familiar mares walked into the barn. They ambled right past me without so much as a glance.

"Now what's this ya wanted t' talk about, Rarity, that we needed t' hide out in the barn fer?"

"Well," the elegant white unicorn said, looking at her freckled friend with the frazzled blonde mane, "Rainbow Dash said that last week at the Summer Sun Celebration, she came on to you, and you didn't mind…"

I wanted to snicker. Rarity had managed to strike a perfect tone between gossip and suggestiveness. Yet I could tell, without a doubt, that she was only playing with the orange mare with the three-apple cutie mark. Call it intuition, but I just knew that Rarity only had eyes for the stallions. And that made Applejack's expression all the funnier.

"Oh hay no!" Applejack nearly shouted, backpedaling. "Gauldangit, not you too! Rainbow Dash was drunk. Again. An' I told 'er…"

I really wished my host would laugh, because it was hard to be in stitches when your body wouldn't cooperate. But in the very least, I could tell Applesnack that whatever he had been afraid I might find in here was rubbish.

Applejack regained her composure as Rarity fluttered her eyes but failed to stifle a ladylike snicker quite fast enough.

"Oh for the love'a…" Applejack stomped. "Didja drag me all the way back here jus' t' mess w' me." She put a hoof to her freckled face. "Aw hell… did Rainbow Dash put ya up to this? This is one of her practical jokes, ain't it?"

"Actually… well yes," Rarity admitted. "It was her idea…"

"Ah knew it!" Applejack huffed, stomping again.

"…but I really do have something I need to talk to you about," the graceful unicorn said, abruptly turning quite serious.

Applejack could tell the mood had changed. Fun, even that at her expense, was over. "What is it?"

"I've… come across some new magic," Rarity said cautiously. "Zebra magic." She stopped, measuring the country mare's reaction.

"Ya mean, like the things Zecora used t' brew?"

"Not exactly, no." Rarity lowered her voice. "Have you ever heard of a soul jar?"

Applejack stared at her purple-maned friend. "No. An' Ah ain't sure Ah want to."

But Rarity wasn't ready to stop. "A soul jar is an item… it can be any item really, it doesn't actually have to be a jar… that you put a soul into."

Applejack looked taken aback, but the unicorn continued. It was as if, now that she had started talking, she couldn't stop until it was all out. "Putting a soul into a soul jar *changes* the object. It becomes effectively indestructible, for one. And you can use the soul to hang other enchantments on…" The unicorn stopped at a thought, then added, "It becomes a foundation. Not unlike a megaspell framework, I suppose."

"Rarity!" Applejack gasped. "What the hell has gotten into you, girl! Where did you even get this magic? This is…" The orange mare's voice lowered to a hiss. "This is *necromancy!*"

Rarity looked to her friend and nodded, her own eyes wide. "I know." Then, in answer, "It's from a zebra book called The Black Book." Again she paused, thinking, "Well, the Black Book of… something I can't pronounce. A name, but it doesn't have vowels in the places it ought to. It has all manner of extremely icky things in it. Soul jars. Bypass Spells. Magic to tear souls apart…"

With each word, Applejack's expression became more horrified. Rarity seemed not to quite notice. She gave a smirk like she was revealing a particularly juicy bit of gossip, "If you buy into the more colorful background of the book, they say that it was written by a mad zebra alchemist who communicated with the stars through dreams."

"Who is 'they'?" Applejack asked, but never got an answer.

"Now, I know all of this is perfectly dreadful, and my first instinct was to burn the book and be rid of it," Rarity said. For the first time since the conversation turned dire, Applejack looked a little relieved. That relief was short lived.

"But the top magician in my Ministry says that he ought to be able to take that soul-shredding magic and rework it, turning it into a precision spell that would allow him to cut off just a small portion of a pony's soul. Enough to create a soul jar without doing any real damage to the subject of the spell."

"And… why would you want to do that?"

"Think of it, Applejack! What soldier wouldn't be willing to give up just a small bit of her soul to be put into her own armor, making it completely impervious to *any* bullet? Any weapon?" Rarity was positively glowing in the rapture of her Idea. "And it wouldn't have to be those ugly metal things your Ministry has been working on. We could make perfect, impenetrable armor out of dresses. Beautiful dresses!"

Applejack was reeling.

"And not only would our soldiers look absolutely fabulous, and be immune to the weapons of the enemy," Rarity continued, "They wouldn't be weighed down, encumbered. Until now, armored barding has always come at the price of mobility, but now…"

"Rarity?"

The unicorn stopped, putting her hooves on Applejack's shoulders. "Applejack, just think. None of our family would have to die in battle anymore. If Big Macintosh had…"

"NO!"

Rarity dropped back, stunned by Applejack's sudden outburst. But the orange earth pony wasn't done. She advanced on her friend, jabbing a hoof at her breast. *"Don't you* dare *bring my brother inta this* ***blackness!"***

Rarity gasped, eyes wide.

"This talk stops now!" Applejack demanded. "Ah don't wanna hear another word. This is… vile. No soldier would give what yer suggestin'. An' even if they were willin', how could we let 'em? Some prices are just too high! Don't ya think, if there weren't horrific consequences t' playin' wi' these things, we'd already be facin' zebras with impenetrable armor? Or bullets what could shoot through anything? Or worse?"

"I…" Rarity stopped. She turned her gaze away from Applejack, a flush of embarrassment on her cheeks. "Oh… you're *so* right. I… I don't know what I was thinking!"

Applejack let out breath in deep relief. "It's okay, sugercube. Ya got wrapped up in a notion an' didn't really think it through. Happens t' alla us now an' again."

The unicorn looked up to Applejack, smiling weakly. "Well, then… I'm lucky I have a good friend who can slap me out of it."

Applejack gave a chuckle. "No harm done then. Now Ah want ya t' go back t' Canterlot and continue workin' on your designs. Ya have a heap o' work on yer plate as it is. An' neither o' us will mention this ever again."

"Like it never happened," Rarity said, genuine thankfulness in her voice.

"Like it ne'er happened," Applejack agreed.

Rarity and Applejack embraced each other in a hug. Then the unicorn slipped elegantly away and started back for the barn door.

"Hey," Applejack called out. Her friend stopped, looking back. "An' when ya get back, burn that book. Or better yet, have somepony else do it fer ya," the orange pony suggested. "Ah get the suspicion that even readin' it was messin' with yer head."

Rarity lifted a hoof to her chin in thought, then nodded. "Yes, I do think you are right, Applejack." She gave a lady-like frown. "That book is *dangerous.*"

Applejack watched Rarity push the barn door open with a hoof and walk out. Finally, my host moved, stepping lightly so as not to make any noise, following the beautiful white unicorn.

"Hey!" Applejack called again, galloping past me fast enough to make my cloak flutter. She stopped at the door, calling out, "An' fer whatever nonsense Rainbow Dash put ya up to, that hug does *not* count!

* * *

I was back. Back in my own body, and back in the presence of SteelHooves and Blueberry Sabre, both high-ranking members of the Steel Rangers. The wearers of those "ugly metal things" Applejack had gone ahead and designed. Gears were starting to move in my head again. The pony in my brain was busy shoving puzzle pieces into place. And the first one that clicked was the memory of Applejack and Rarity talking in Spike's memory:

"Ah sure hope this ain't nothin' t' do with… that… *thing we never talked about."*

"Oh no, darling. I gave that project up ages ago."

SteelHooves interrupted my mental puzzle-solving with an uncharacteristic tone. "Well. What was the memory?"

I blinked. I was no longer thinking that the issue was Applejack's fidelity, which should never have been in question. But I was at a loss as for what had SteelHooves on edge. Clearly, Applejack had talked her friend away from that horrifying course. Otherwise, such perfect armors would be still around today.

"It was… a conversation," I offered, my brain working to figure out how to pull the information I wanted out of them. "Between the mares of the Ministry of Technology and the Ministry of Image." I wondered if I should have called it the Ministry of Wartime Technology, but it was too late to change my wording.

"It was a long conversation about several things, most of them trivial," I said, not exactly dishonestly. "What specifically were you looking for?"

SteelHooves shook his head. "Telling you would bias your answer."

Elder Blueberry Sabre snorted. "Well, if you won't, I have no problem telling her." The elderly mare smiled at me. "Tell him that this memory proves the values of the Ministry Mare he so stubbornly clings to are a fiction. This memory proves that she didn't really care about the lives of the soldiers, but only about advancing her own designs. And when some other pony came up with a much, much better armor design, she made sure it never saw the light of day."

Oh. That's what this was about.

I blinked, feeling angry now. *That's* what this was about? Of all the much, much worse things in that memory, the Elder of the Steel Rangers was focused on *this?* I about spit my bit.

Standing up as tall as my little frame would allow, I huffed, "How about I tell you what I *didn't* see in that memory?"

Blueberry Sabre blinked in surprise. SteelHooves took a tentative step towards me.

"What I didn't see was my host!" From the blank look in the Elder's eyes, I realized I was using terms I had come up with myself. I had no idea what the proper term for a memory's host was. Not that it mattered. The Elder was an earth pony. She couldn't see into a memory orb without a recollector anyway. It seemed increasingly likely that she had never actually seen the memory herself, or that she had many years ago and lacked a clear recollection of its contents.

So I tried again, keeping my anger at this nonsense tightly under control. "I didn't see the pony whose memory it was. Not even a forehoof. And while that's not entirely unusual, I'm quite certain that the two Ministry Mares couldn't see her either. I don't think they would have had that conversation if they knew somepony else was present."

Both the Elder and SteelHooves were still for at least a moment, actually paying attention.

"What I saw in there was that somepony was spying on the Ministry Mares. Invisible." I remembered the itchy strangeness. "And I don't think it was even a pony. I'm pretty sure I just shared the memory of a zebra."

Another puzzle piece slotted into my head. I lifted my PipBuck, saying, "I found this in the rubble of a recruitment center out near the Shattered Hoof facility." I played back the old recording, removing the earbloom attachment so that both of them could hear:

> *"I'm sending you one of the devices recovered from Shattered Hoof Ridge. Intelligence suggested that the zebras had developed invisibility spell fetishes, but* **this** *looks like something designed by the Ministry of Magic. It's even PipBuck compatible. I hate to say it, but it looks like we've got traitors in our midst. If somepony in M.A.S. is leaking arcane technology to the zebras, the Princess will need to take action."*

⁂

What followed the recording was much discussion; but in the end, the only thing resolved was that I had gotten at least a bit of the Elder's trust while managing sidetrack both of them from their earlier argument.

It was over an hour later when Elder Blueberry Sabre got up and trotted to the window, staring out at the angry red glow coming from the walled-off portion of Fillydelphia.

"If you're going in there, you won't be able to do it like that," she said. "Not with armor and an arsenal and a squad of companions."

"Why not?" I asked. "I'm not worried about getting past the wall. I can just float us over when there is a gap in the patrols." That was, at least, my plan.

"Because," Blueberry Sabre turned to me, "You will never get close to Red Eye that way. He's always protected. In the very least by a flock of griffins if not by a wing of those damned alicorns. The first sign of trouble, and he'll hop his sky chariot and leave the city. You'll lose any chance you have of taking him down before you even know it."

Damn. I was confident of being able to sneak close until she mentioned the alicorns. I should have figured this couldn't be so easy. But I was damned if I would just give up and go home. Not after the fresh reminder of what these slavers were doing to innocent ponies.

"I can help you," the Elder offered. "If you agree to help me in return."

Oh. This was going to be one of *those* days.

The Elder laid it out for me. She could get me and maybe one of my companions into the walled section of the city… stripped of our possessions and dressed in the rags of slaves. I'd have to work my way to him from there, preferably by gaining his trust rather than by body count. The latter method was likely to backfire for the same reason a covert assault would.

"You may have more to fear from the inmates than the guards," Blueberry Sabre noted. "Red Eye's armies have started rounding up raiders and putting them to work as slaves along with the rest. Some of the ponies you'll be stuck with in there are exceptionally nasty refuse."

This plan just kept getting better.

"And what do you want from me in return?" I asked finally.

"Two things." Blueberry Sabre walked round the office as she spoke. "First, Red Eye has managed to develop some sort of engine fueled by radiation. He's been having the slaves mine the Fillydelphia Crater itself for irradiated debris, which he can turn into usable energy to run his factories."

SteelHooves nickered, "Well, that's a game-changer." Red Eye's claims of building a New Equestria, at least on an infrastructural level, suddenly gained a lot more authenticity.

"Indeed," Blueberry Sabre agreed. She turned to me. "I want the plans for that engine."

Okay. Plans for a Radiation Engine. That was one. "And number two?"

The Steel Ranger Elder frowned even more deeply. "Our intelligence states that Red Eye has gotten ahold of research into something called a Bypass Spell."

I felt a jolt. I had heard of that sort of magic not two hours ago, and not in a pleasant context.

"I want you to find his research on Bypass Spells. Confiscate what you can. Destroy the rest." The Elder stomped both her forehooves. "Thoroughly obliterate it."

I raised an eyebrow. "Since when is the Ministry of Wartime Technology interested in spell research?"

SteelHooves stepped in. "Since it's a matter of survival." He explained, "The zebras created Bypass Enchantments midway through the war. A Bypass augments another magical effect, allowing it to ignore one specific type of thing. The zebras, for instance, used it to create balefire bursts… the much smaller version of the megaspell you are familiar with… with a zebra bypass. With that, a zebra could trot into an area crowded with ponies, set off the blast, and kill everypony within a block or two without being harmed herself."

The mental image of an invisible zebra walking into a crowded Stable atrium during one of Velvet Remedy's performances suddenly lodged in my mind and refused to leave.

"The unicorns of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences failed to crack the enchantment before the megaspells fell," Blueberry Sabre informed me. "But it's impossible to know how close they were. And thus how close Red Eye is. I think, however, that you can grasp why it is in everypony's best interest that Red Eye is not allowed to finish this research."

I nodded, now imagining spells with an alicorn bypass. By the Goddesses!

"So," the Elder asked, "Do you agree to my offer?"

As much as I hated to, I didn't see another way. Not now, now that simply killing Red Eye wasn't enough.

* * *

"This is a *stupid* plan."

I sighed, looking at my friends. "Almost definitely, but it's the plan we've got."

"Ah ain't lettin' ya go in there alone!" Calamity insisted. "Especially unarmed!"

I smiled at his loyalty. "I won't be totally unarmed," I assured him. "They won't be taking my horn. And they can't take my PipBuck either." Instead, we would be wrapping my forelegs in bulky rags to hide its presence.

"Why do you have to go alone?" Velvet Remedy asked, almost pleading. If anything, she seemed to like this plan even less than Calamity.

"Because…" Because I don't want the damn slavers to get their hooves on you. You're gorgeous. And in there, beautiful is a really bad thing to be. "I need you out here. You're a non-combatant, and that place is full of enslaved raiders." Please, please don't make me explain further!

Velvet Remedy scowled, clearly hating every word, but said nothing more.

“One o’ us needs t’ be with ya!” Calamity demanded. “Why not me?”

At least with Calamity I felt comfortable with a direct answer. “Two reasons,” I said, feeling bizarrely like Blueberry Sabre for a moment. “First, because you are a pegasus. And Luna only knows what they would do with a pegasus. You folk aren’t exactly a common prize down here.” I pressed my lips together in chagrin. “I don’t think we’d be able to stay together past the gate.”

Calamity was not at all satisfied. “Ah don’t care. Let ’em try t’ do what they think Ah’ll let ’em get away with. Ah’m not abandonin’ ya cuz o’ that!”

I had expected that, but I still felt a wave of genuine gratitude. But before I could move on to my second reason, Velvet Remedy interrupted.

“How about SteelHooves?”

“I can’t go,” SteelHooves said simply. “A Steel Ranger is a bit… conspicuous.”

Velvet sighed with exasperation. “We all know you’re a ghoul now. You don’t have to hide in your armor. You can take it off.”

“No. I can’t.”

Calamity cocked his head, giving SteelHooves a querying look.

“Why not?” Velvet Remedy pushed.

“Because my body is fused into it,” was the ghoul’s answer, eliciting several gasps (one of which was from me).

“Oh!” Calamity took a few steps back. “Yer *that* kinda ghoul!”

Wait… there are types of ghouls now? Other than ghoul-pony and zombie-pony?

Velvet Remedy looked equally surprised by Calamity’s reaction. “What kind of ghoul?”

“He’s a *Canterlot* Ghoul.”

SteelHooves nodded. Velvet Remedy and I were still in the dark.

“Would somepony care to explain?”

No more secrets.

* * *

Ponies who suffered massive amounts of magical radiation and survived were forced to endure the cruel deterioration of becoming a ghoul-pony. Since the zebras had employed different kinds of megaspells, it only stood to reason that there were minor differences in the effects. In most cases, these differences were barely recognizable except between the ghoul-ponies themselves. But Canterlot ghoul-ponies were an entirely different sort. Because the megaspell unleashed in Canterlot was unlike any other.

“When the bombs started to fall,” SteelHooves told us, “Princess Luna threw up a magical shield over the entire city. Canterlot was bombarded by hundreds of missile strikes. None of them were megaspells, like the missiles which hit Cloudsdayle or Fillydelphia, but they would have been devastating all the same had they struck home. But the Princess kept the shield up.”

Velvet Remedy and I sat, listening, almost entranced. Calamity paced off to the side fretfully.

“I was stationed in one of the hamlets that surrounded the city, just outside the perimeter of the shield. My squad’s orders were to evacuate the hamlets, getting as many of the ponies to shelters or Stables as we could. The blast-wash from those missiles exploding against the shield wiped out hundreds in the first few minutes. The bombardment lasted hours."

SteelHooves took a deep, trembling breath and pressed on. Even hidden in his armor, I could tell he was shaken. Although at the time I thought it was by the memory of those deaths. I would realize later it was because of what happened next.

"Applejack was with me. But when strikes started, she fled back to Ponyville, leaving us to do our work while she tried to ensure all her family got safely into Stable Two."

I suddenly wondered if Applejack herself had made it. Had she been in Stable Two when it closed? I saw Velvet Remedy glancing at me and suspected she was wondering the same thing.

"But the missile strikes were just part of the zebra's ploy. The megaspell was already in the city. A special one… after all, this one was meant to kill Luna and Celestia, not just three-quarters of a million ponies."

"The Pink Cloud," Calamity said abruptly, stopping.

"Yes."

Calamity momentarily took over the tale. "The Pink Cloud is… was… a great radioactive cloud of entropic, necromantic gas. Like taint, it didn't care if you had gas masks. Nothing protected against it. Everything it touched, it seeped into and rotted. I've heard horror stories of bodies found partially melded into sidewalks, or with their saddles fused to their bones. Canterlot is still toxic today. The streets and buildings soaked it up like sponges and are slowly releasing it as they decay."

"The zebras wanted the shield," SteelHooves continued. "It kept the Pink Cloud concentrated in the city, strong enough to fatally poison even Celestia and Luna. By the time they comprehended that they were dying, it was too late. But still, they kept up the shield. I'm told they took turns, one powering the shield while the other tried to regain a little strength. That, in the end, they were holding each other for support."

"Why?" I asked, feeling tears forming in my eyes. "Why didn't they just let the shield fail? The city was already doomed! Why didn't they escape?"

"Would you have?" SteelHooves asked simply. "I was still in one of the more remote hamlets when the shield finally came down. The city had soaked up enough of the Pink Cloud that the exposure wasn't fatal, but…"

Calamity again added to the tale, a tone of disgust in his voice. "By the time Luna and Celestia realized the Pink Cloud was killin' them, the first attack had been hours ago. The pegasi had already closed up the sky. The wind was beginnin' t' go wild."

With a sad flap of his wings, our Dashite friend explained, "If Celestia and Luna had let that spell o' theirs drop, they probably woulda survived… 'though most likely at only a fraction o' their former selves. But a whole heap o' other ponies woulda been doomed as the uncontrolled winds blew Pink Cloud out over all them evacuating hamlets, over farms… t'would 'ave destroyed all life far as Ponyville. Maybe farther."

Mournfully, he informed us, "Ah'm so sorry. T' both of ya. Ah really am. But… Luna and Celestia ain't Goddesses watchin' ya from the heavens like yer Stable teacher taught ya. The Princesses gave their lives so's that yer ancestors could make it inta that Stable and live."

It was a long time before Velvet Remedy and I were ready to talk again. For a while, we just moved away from the others, found a corner by ourselves, and held each other in silence.

In that time, I decided that I was damn well going to keep praying to Celestia and Luna anyway. It didn’t matter if the accounts didn’t match my beliefs. I still believed in my heart that somehow, Luna and Celestia were up there. Watching us. Caring about us. Giving us guidance.

I just didn’t know if what I believed was true. I realized it probably wasn’t. But I could choose to believe anyway.

Finally, we gathered together again for round two of everypony not going into Fillydelphia with me. I have to admit, with my faith shaken, I no longer felt as confident. But I plowed on anyway.

“Second,” I told Calamity, picking up where we had left off, “You’re a pegasus.”

“uh, Li’lpip? Ah think that was the first one.”

“Well, it’s also the second one. Because you’re my escape route. My lifeline. Nopony else can swoop in and rescue me if things go bad. I need you out here so you can do that.”

Calamity frowned but seemed to find that more palatable. “Wait!” He looked at me like I was trying to dupe him. “How the hell am Ah s’posed t’ know when yer in trouble, or where t’ find ya, if Ah’m out here an’ yer in there?”

Fortunately, I already had this planned out. “These slavers, at least the rank and file, don’t seem to be the most educated lot. I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to tell where my PipBuck ends and a peripheral begins. So I’m confident I can get in with a slotted attachment.” I smiled. “That means either a StealthBuck or the broadcaster we got from the griffins.”

I floated out both. “I’ll take the broadcaster. You take the StealthBuck. SteelHooves can activate it for you when…”

“Ah know how t’use a StealthBuck,” Calamity interrupted, holding up a hoof to the device. “So, how do Ah get yer call, genius girl. Case ya missed it, Ah don’t have one of them PipBucks of muh own.”

I grinned as I next floated out Velvet Remedy’s custom PipBuck, still in my saddlebags after all these weeks of travel. Velvet Remedy gave me a pained expression.

“Yes, I kept it,” I told her before she could say anything. “And yes, I know you don’t like wearing it. You shouldn’t have to. This is just the backup plan if the main plan fails.”

Calamity raised an eyebrow. “An’ that is?”

Finally, I levitated Homage’s override device out of my saddlebags. “I have a very important mission for all of you to complete while I’m gone.” I looked my companions over and decided that there had never been a better team assembled for such a job. “I need you to take this to the Fillydelphia Tower and attach it to the maneframe in the base station. Once you do, it will give DJ Pon3 both eyes and voice in Fillydelphia, kicking Red Eye out. And that will free up the receivers in the station to pick up my broadcast.”

“Red Eye’s almost certainly got some heavy forces guarding that tower,” SteelHooves noted. “I expect we’ll be in for a battle.”

“Then you’ll definitely need a medical pony,” Velvet Remedy asserted.

Calamity tipped up the brim of his hat. “Well then. Looks like we got ourselves a plan.”

* * *

“Go ahead,” SteelHooves said, holding the last of his four memory orbs out to me on an armored hoof. “You’ve seen the others. You might as well see the last one before you go.”

I didn’t think I was ready for another trip into Applesnack’s memories. The day had been too much of an emotional maelstrom. I felt weak and fragile, like another gust could cause me to break. I put up a warding hoof, shaking my head.

SteelHooves grunted. “Compared to what you’ve seen, this one is gentle.” He pressed, “You trust me, don’t you?”

“To very specific extents,” I admitted. “It’s not… you and Applejack having sex, is it?”

SteelHooves stared silently. Then he put the orb down, letting it roll towards me on the floor. “You have a dirty mind.” He turned and walked out.

I stared at the orb as it rolled to a stop against my right forehoof.

* * *

“This isn’t fair!”

I recognized the voice of Rainbow Dash almost a full minute before I heard her.

I was SteelHooves. Not Applesnack this time, not with the heavy armor pressing all around me. My vision beyond the inside of the helmet was limited to the view out my visor, but I was graced with an exceptionally complex and sophisticated Eyes-Forward Sparkle. Within the helmet, I seemed to have access to everything my E.F.S. and PipBuck provided… and more.

Breathing inside the armor was unpleasant. My muzzle was pressed into a rebreather. The air was cool and fresh, likely supplied by a minor air talisman, but the mouthpiece was simply uncomfortable.

The armor itself was bulky and weighed down on me, but I felt strong. Stronger than in any memory I had experienced before. The weight, however heavy, felt no more taxing than carrying a light pack.

My hoofsteps were heavy, like my hooves were… well, encased in steel armor exactly as they were. It was, all in all, an enlightening look into SteelHooves’ existence. And while I could see the advantages, I did not envy him for it.

I trod down a hallway, focused on the wooden double doors at the end. This, I guessed, was an office building of some sort. Not, mercifully, a battlefield. There seemed to be no imminent threats.

I felt myself raise an armored hoof and push open the door with measured gentleness.

Inside was a barely-furnished office that looked almost unused. A few shelves and a desk. And this was where Rainbow Dash and Applejack seemed to be having an argument. Applejack was standing behind the desk, dressed in a suit that she looked distinctly uncomfortable in. Rainbow Dash, on the other hoof, was wearing that same purple and black uniform I had seen her in earlier today and years ago. Or, rather, a pristine new version of the same basic design. It had a jagged yellow neckline and a skull-shaped cloud on the flank shooting a rainbow-colored lightning bolt, covering where Dash's actual cutie mark would be.

Both mares turned to look at me. Applejack nodded, giving SteelHooves a smile of gratitude. Rainbow Dash only seemed to size up the metal warrior, clearly unable to recognize the pony beneath. I recalled that the pegasus wouldn't learn about Applejack and Applesnack until a party that, I suspected, was still a year or two away. Her attention returned to her orange-coated friend.

"It's just not right!" the blue pegasus spat with righteous indignation. "The Ministry of Awesome is putting up almost fifty towers – as tall as the clouds – all over Equestria and here you are having to sell Sweet Apple Acres just to get a suit of armor built? How does that make sense?"

Okay, maybe not an argument.

"That's cuz buildin' those towers is all y'all seem t' be doin'," Applejack explained patiently. "Meanwhile, muh Ministry is helpin' fund over four dozen industries, givin' them the subsidies they need t' keep runnin' until they c'n pull a solid profit. An' next year, there'll be twelve more."

Rainbow Dash gaped. Then cocked her head. "Don't you sometimes think the Ministry of Technology is a little *too* successful?"

Applejack nudged her cowpony hat and smiled.

"No, seriously," the blue pegasus claimed, spreading her wings. "It's gotten so sometimes I can't even recognize Equestria anymore."

The orange pony with the graying blond mane gave her friend a look. I hadn't noticed the grey in the other memories, although the difference in age was at best a few years. I realized with amusement that, at some point, Applejack had started dying her hair. I wondered if, at that age, I'd feel the urge to. But then, I'd be a lucky mare to live that long in the Equestrian Wasteland.

"For example, do you really need all those roads?" the rainbow-maned pegasus asked.

"Some 'o us ain't got wings, remember."

There was a clop at the door. SteelHooves trotted to Applejack's side like a bodyguard. Rainbow Dash scowled but moved to the side.

"Come on in!" Applejack called out.

The door pushed open and Apple Bloom walked into the room. She was beautifully groomed and wore a business dress of mahogany and rose that went well with her mane. She looked infinitely more comfortable in her dress than her older sister did in the suit. There was a business bag strapped to her side.

"Wait…" Rainbow Dash said, looking between the two sisters. "You're selling your farm… to your own sister?"

"Technically," Apple Bloom said in a politely professional voice. "She's sellin' Sweet Apple Acres to Stable-Tec." The younger sister turned her head, pulling open her business bag and pulling out a clipboard with her teeth. She offered it to Applejack, who took the other end, then set it on the desk between them.

"Ah think you'll find everything is just as we promised," Apple Bloom told her sister. I noticed her voice was a touch more urbane than her older sister's, the country accent not as strong.

SteelHooves moved towards Apple Bloom, leaning close and whispering into her ear, “You’re not going to plow the place and build a mall, are you?”

“Oh heavens no,” Apple Bloom whispered back, looking uncomfortable. Almost… guilty. Her older sister caught the look.

“Hold on. Yer not gonna kick me an’ granny off the farm, are ya?”

Apple Bloom looked wounded. “How can you even ask that? Ah’m your sister!”

“Cuz Ah know that look,” Applejack said sternly. “An’ it’s cuz Ah’m yer sister that Ah do. Now spill it.”

Apple Bloom sighed, then pulled out a set of blueprints, unfurling them on the desk in front of her older sister and the two (three, really) guests.

“You’ll still have rights to the trees an’ the apples, jus’ like we promised. Stable-Tec is only buyin’ rights to the land. But you’ll have t’ move all these apple trees in this section here. And you won’t be able to use the barn until next spring.”

“What?” Applejack cocked an eyebrow at her younger sister. “Why?”

“Cuz we’re gonna be buildin’ a Stable there.”

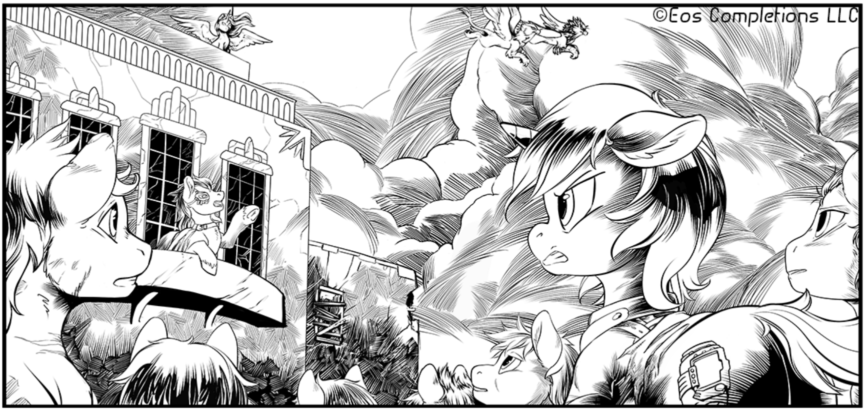
* * *

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: A Little Dash – While wearing light armor or no armor, you run 20% faster.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Generous Souls



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"We stand at the dawn of a new golden age. Where others merely survive, we thrive! And while I have led your efforts, it has been by your own strength… Because, yes, freedom is what we all work towards."

Alone.

I had given my possessions, even my barding, to Calamity. Knight Poppyseed had brought me soiled, filthy slave cloths to wrap myself in. Thick wrappings had gone around my right foreleg to hide my PipBuck, complete with twigs and bloodstains to suggest my leg had been cruelly wounded. (If anypony asked, I intended to tell them I'd been run through with a piece of rebar.)

Then I had been shackled. (As with the slavers before, Knight Poppyseed had been unable to shackle me properly at the hoof thanks to my PipBuck, so she had locked the manacles above my knees.) I had floated myself into the cage of a slave wagon and bedded down in moldy hay filled with small, itchy bugs. It had taken only minutes to become wretchedly uncomfortable. Between that, and nearly getting fucked in the tail by a giant flaming Pinkie Pie the evening before, I had been deemed to look decently pathetic.

I had been allowed to attach a few bobby pins to my rags, but I would have to hope I could find a screwdriver somewhere on the other side of The Wall.

Then, with worried goodbyes, my companions left me alone. I was to lay there and wait for a member of Red Eye's slavers whom the Steel Rangers had sufficiently bribed (or perhaps ensured the cooperation of in less wholesome ways) to come and get the slave wagon.

I'd forgotten what it felt like to be alone. I had spent my whole previous life alone. I hadn't had any friends growing up; and my mother, as much as I loved her, wasn't the sort of parent a filly could feel "together" with. Alone is cold and dull and miserable. It is a void that aches to be filled. And the little hobbies and distractions that I had turned to had never really filled that hole. Because it was a hole that could only be filled with companionship.

Growing up, the closest I had come to that was music – the singing on the Stable Two broadcast. At least with music, there was another pony involved who was trying to make a connection. And I could pretend that pony was trying to make a connection specifically with me, not just anypony who was listening. The illusion was never perfect, and it couldn't be held beyond the song. But while the music was playing, the mirage of friendship helped protect me against the cold.

Needless to say, it was the songs of Velvet Remedy which I had cherished the most. I had even fallen in love, I think, with my dream of her. I still remembered the hurt when my ridiculous and unrealistic mental image of her was shattered by the real thing standing in a train car, a non-prisoner in a slaver town. And even then, I think, I still clung to little fragments of my dream-Remedy until the day she shot me.

That said, I wouldn't have traded my very real friendship with the actual pony for anything, much less for a relationship with my two-dimensional daydream. What I had was better. Far better. Because it was real.

When I left Stable Two, my life changed forever. And the most drastic change wasn't the vast open wasteland, or the sickly sunlight that pushed its way through the clouds. It wasn't the horrors and wickedness and cruelty I had seen, or the daunting amount of pain I had suffered, or even the growing river of pony blood drowning my hooves.

The most drastic change was friendship. And it started just a few days out of the Stable with a pony named Calamity.

Calamity was unlike any pony I had ever met. He was fearless and noble and just in a way that I could only aspire to. And he cared about me in a way nopony, not even my mother, ever did. He was willing to stand by me, even when I was being foolish and wrong. Not that we never disagreed, because we did often enough. But he gave me the benefit of the doubt. He trusted me and he was somepony I knew I could trust in return.

I freely admit that I had been jealous when Calamity and Velvet Remedy had started to gravitate towards each other. (And, in retrospect, I have to wonder: was my conviction that they were a couple already accurate or a self-fulfilling prophesy?) How foalish I was to feel that way. But friendship was and is still new to me, and I had many lessons to learn about it. (And many, many more to go, if the sheer number of Spike's stories are to be believed.)

Only after I had come to accept their closeness, and take comfort in it, was my heart really open enough to embrace Homage. I had friendship, but the void goes deeper than that. I wanted more than companionship. I yearned for love and physical intimacy.

I will also admit that when Homage first opened the possibility, I was drawn to her out of desperation. But that changed. *She* changed that. Likewise, I would not blame a pony for thinking that our relationship had been fast and brief. But while it is true that I had not met her in coat and mane until Tenpony Tower, I had gotten to know much of her before seeing her face-to-face, as she had gotten to know me. In truth, I have known Homage almost as long as I have known Calamity.

True, I had not known her deeply and personally until Tenpony Tower, but who really knows their friends well in the first few weeks? And I can safely say that the connection we had built before meeting was laid on a solid foundation. I can say this thanks in great part to the honesty that I realize Homage embodies. The Homage that I grew to know as DJ Pon3 was and is the real Homage. Not all of her, granted, and not without trappings. But real all the same.

Homage knows of me at my best, but has also seen me at my worst. And instead of being scared away, she has embraced me and let me in. She has held and comforted me. And she has done so much more, allowing me an intimacy that I had only daydreamed about before, and usually to my private shame. With Homage, I don't feel ashamed.

Having seen the memories of SteelHooves, a melancholy realization had crept into my thoughts. He was the only of my companions who has been in a similar relationship. (Yet… unless Calamity and Velvet Remedy have managed to be up to things with a far greater degree of sneakiness and stealth than I attribute to either of them.) Like me, he had a companion whom he could trust to be open and honest with him. And, like me, he chose to keep things from her. I am quite sure he did not reveal to Applejack the murder he committed. Whereas, in my case, I have kept from Homage… well, another murder SteelHooves committed.

Thinking on these things, I suddenly found the parallel downright creepy.

SteelHooves once told me that I would learn that he wasn't a "better pony" – which I certainly have seen is true – just like she did. And while I can only guess at what befell their relationship, I do know that he and Applejack were together the day the bombs fell. I must assume they at least worked at mending any damage his dark secrets had caused. And I also know that, ultimately, she left him. She chose her family over him, and she left him behind.

And he's been living with that abandonment for two hundred years. Alone.

With an aching heart and a sense of unease, I found myself desperately needing to talk to Homage. With any luck, I would be able to do so as soon as my friends had the override installed. I wondered if I would be able to speak to her just by talking to the air. But from what I had heard, it seemed more likely that I would need to get to the station myself to have real communication with her. Either way, I was determined to come clean. For better or for worse.

Unlike the hobbies and distractions of my lonely youth, friendship really *can* fill the void enough for a pony to be happy. And while I wouldn't normally consider my experiences in the Equestrian Wasteland to be happy ones, I really have been happier out here than I ever was in Stable Two.

Being with friends is a blanket against the cold. A bulwark that makes you stronger. A connection that makes you bigger. Without friends, I was exposed, weak and small.

And, on an unrelated note, itchy.

* * *

Chain-link fencing crackled with energy, surrounding a barricaded outer gate. Guards watched with amusement as the slaver pulled my wagon up to The Wall.

"Only one?" a guard mare called out. She was heavily barded and wore a battle saddle bearing four combat shotguns. The sight made me cringe. "A whole wagon for just one? Been slacking, Gnash?"

The slaver pulling my wagon just grunted. I scratched at my neck with a hindhoof and tried not to wince every time the wagon jolted as it rolled over the broken, rocky streets. I unrealistically hoped that slaves were given baths.

"And such a small one too," a guard buck in similar barding called out. I noticed that I couldn't see any weapons on him, save for his horn and hooves. I wondered if that made him less or more dangerous? "If it wasn't a unicorn, I'd say toss it back in the lake."

Itching badly, I really wished I would be tossed in a lake. It occurred to me, however, that this was not the first time a slaver had suggested unicorns were considered an extra-valuable prize. Not entirely surprising, considering that the unicorns in Stable Two were often expected to go into technical work thanks to the fine manipulation our magic allowed. I wondered what work Red Eye was putting us to. I'd probably find out soon enough.

While quadruple-combat-shotgun-pony kept aim on me, her male counterpart threw a lever, killing the electric crackle of the chain-link fence. He hoofed a button, and a section of the fence began to roll open with considerable clatter. Quadruple-combat-shotgun-pony continued to keep her battle saddle trained on me, a single unicorn pony shackled and caged, as did two snipers hidden within steel bunker towers on either side of The Wall's inner gate. The heads of patrol ponies could be seen walking the parameter of the wall on a raised platform just behind it. Even knowing me, it felt like a ridiculous amount of overkill.

A griffin arced overhead, checking out the latest arrival, and flew away laughing.

"By the you-know-who, Gnash, when I first saw this one, I thought you'd bucked your horseshoes and actually brought in a filly!" the mare snickered, making me feel ever smaller. "I was thinking maybe I ought to blow your head off before Stern got ahold of you."

Gnash, my "chauffeur", merely grunted again.

"What's this?" the guard buck asked, peering in at me. His horn glowed and a jagged, rusty spear jutted between the bars at me. I cringed back. The unicorn frowned at me and tipped the spear so the head of it caught on the blood-soaked wrapping around my PipBuck and pulled it away.

Crap! I wasn't even in the gate and the plan was falling apart.

"Oh," he said with a smiling grunt. "Think you're a clever pony, do you?" He gave me a cruel leer. "Let's see how clever you feel *inside.*"

Inside? Did he intend to rape me, I wondered with a shot of panic, or just let me through the gate?

The guard mare shot him a look and then gave a cruel laugh. "Oh please, do it! Hell, here, let me help hold her down!" She gave her companion an evil smirk, "Fifteen minutes of fun… if that… and you'll be scratching at the haybugs biting your sheath for a week!"

I felt suddenly thankful for the infested hay.

The buck backed up with a fearful look, then scowled at the mare. "You'd really enjoy that, wouldn't you?"

"More than life itself." What a disgusting couple.

"Bah!" He hit the button to close the outer gate and waved a hoof towards the sniper ponies. "Let it through!" He gave me one more look, this one barely containing revulsion. His eyes moved to my PipBuck, now partially visible through the wrappings. "Oh, and tag her to see Doc Slaughter. She's got one of them leg terminals that are a bitch to get off."

For a pony who had been so sorely disappointed that she had a PipBuck for a cutie mark, I was remarkably terrified at the thought I might lose it. As best I could parse the buck's attitude, these slavers had seen PipBuck's before. And had ways to remove them.

The buck threw the lever and the fence around us once again crackled and hummed.

With a rending grind, the huge metal inner gate of The Wall began to lower on massive chains – a drawbridge, complete with a moat on the inner side of The Wall. My PipBuck began to click urgently as it picked up radiation seeping out of the sludge. The Wall was clearly meant to keep anypony from getting out as much as prevent ponies from getting in.

Beyond, I got my first glimpse of inner city Fillydelphia. Slave masters stood guard over mesh-covered workpits, wearing barding and gas masks, pointing weapons down to where poor ponies labored beyond the point of exhaustion. I couldn't tell what work they were doing, but I could tell they were filthy, sick and trembling.

A chimney rose out of the nearest workpit. Hellish, red-tinted exhaust poured out of it. I gagged on the stench of unwashed ponies and noxious fumes.

A swath of bright yellow and green fluttered around the chimney before perching on a nearby pile of rubble. Pyrelight! She cocked her head at me.

I was not alone.

⁂

> *"Behold!"* called out the voice of Red Eye.
>
> *"We stand on the threshold of a new dawn. With every factory we recover, every mill we rebuild, we move one big step forward towards an Equestria where our children can live in the safety and comfort of modern cities, not grovel in the dilapidated ruins of the past. With the stone and glass and steel forged by these, we can rebuild the homes and towers and lanes of mass transportation that will bestow freedom and prosperity upon generations to come! This, my children, is the very last generation that needs to cringe in caves and scramble for two-hundred-year-old scraps of food."*

The Fillydelphia broadcast poured out of speakers everywhere. The messages and music were non-stop, the constant companion of both slave masters and slaves.

Gnash pulled the wagon past several more workpits before drawing to a stop in what had once been a chariot lot. I coughed. My PipBuck was not shy about informing me that the gas pouring out of the workpit smokestacks was poisonous. The guards had gas masks, but they apparently couldn't spare any for the slaves. I trembled with anger. The rate of attrition here must be unconscionable.

The lot was full of cage wagons, most of them recently emptied by other wagon-pullers who were amassing slaves in an open area of the pavement. The gate I had come through was not the only one, and I was not the only new arrival.

Gnash opened my cage and stuck his head in, biting on the chain between my shackles and hauling me roughly out. I was dragged into a throng of suffering ponies, each of whom had clearly been through weeks of torment before even getting here.

A large, black griffin in dark-grey Talon barding landed on the roof adjacent to the chariot lot and turned her white-feathered head to scowl at us. Above her head rose a banner that fluttered in the wind: the Red Eye flag. She had a whip curled under one wing and an anti-machine rifle strapped to her back.

> *"The work is hard, yes,"*

Red Eye's voice continued out of the nearest speaker as the griffin above scanned the miserable group of ponies beneath her.

> *"But only through the generous gift of our efforts can our children, and our children's children, have a better world. We must selflessly give all we can so that a New Equestria may rise. And that is not an easy thing to ask."*

Honestly, Red Eye, I don't see much *asking* going on.

> *"Tribals care only about their own small groups, unable or unwilling to view a larger picture. Raiders and Steel Rangers are the epitome of selfishness, caring only for their own base desires and outdated codes, taking what they want from the rest of us and giving nothing back.*
>
> *"But here, today, and every day, we give back. We create. Where others only know how to tear down, we build! And that, my children, is how we pave the way for…"*

One of the other wagon-pullers shouted at us, making many ponies cringe and one actually burst into tears. "Make yourselves presentable, you worthless mules!"

The griffin's expression suddenly turned from something resembling mild contempt to cold anger. She drew the massive anti-machine rifle faster than I would have thought possible. The report of the gun was like the righteous anger of Luna. The wagon-puller was ripped in two, the bullet punching though the asphalt and burying itself deep in the ground.

A few of the ponies screamed. A magenta mare with an orange mane began backpedaling, trying to keep her hooves out of the spreading pool of blood, her terror-stricken face splattered with what looked like part of the dead slaver's stomach lining.

> *"…We are not animals. We are not zebras. We are ponies! We have a better nature, and a higher calling. We know that the road is hard, and yet we stand and face the challenge. We know that many of us may suffer and perish and never taste the sweet fruits of our labor. But out of generosity and hope, we give of ourselves anyway, so that others may know a better future. Because that future is worth any sacrifice! And yes, the New Equestria does demand sacrifices."*

Okay… but *pony sacrifices?*

Red Eye's speech ended. The music began again, uplifting and regal. The griffin looked not at us, but at the cowering slavers.

"You do ***not*** interrupt when Red Eye is talking!"

She then turned to us. "My name is Stern," the griffin stated, looking down on her new slaves. "And this is *my* town."

"You are workers," Stern informed us as she paced along the rooftop above. "You work towards the building of a brighter tomorrow, towards the New Equestria which will be populated by the Unity. Your work is the gift that you give to the future. And you can either give it willingly, or Red Eye will give it for you."

I found myself conflicted. I seethed at the treatment of the slave ponies, which amounted to nothing short of slow and torturous murder. And yet… I understood Red Eye's goal. Maybe not all of it. The whole Unity thing was getting downright creepy. But the progress? The striving to make the world a better place at any cost? The same drive had left me flank-deep in blood, and I was not apologetic for it.

Red Eye will put you to work doing things we probably should be working together towards anyway. (Although by choice and in safer conditions!) Me? I'll put a bullet through your head if you are a raping, murdering blight on ponykind. In both cases, we had decided that ponies who don't choose to live their lives the right way had forfeited their right to live freely, if at all.

There was a difference. There was a line between Red Eye and me. It just wasn't as thick as I would have liked. Even so, it didn't change the pain I was seeing and hearing all around me, and that these horrors had to stop.

"But most of you don't really care about the future, do you? I can see it in your eyes. You don't give a crap about other ponies. You just care about your 'freedom'. Well, then, listen closely, because I'm going to tell you how to free yourselves," Stern said, her voice gruff with disgust and conviction. Part of me wanted to cry out that I did care. But a much stronger part of me listened intently. Unless I could find a screwdriver and an unguarded place to hide, this might be my best chance.

"You earn it!" Of course you do, I thought. But Stern was quick to expound on that concept. "You can toil in the mills and the factories and the workhouses until you drop. Or you can volunteer for more dangerous jobs. Those who do are rewarded. Red Eye is a very generous stallion. He gives you three options."

The griffin held up three razor-sharp talons and began ticking them down. "You can choose to work on a Stable Recovery Team. There are a lot of Stables in the Fillydelphia area, each rich in resources. But Stables tend to be dangerous. They often have their own security or their own… unique dangers."

I shuddered, feeling a fresh wave of fury.

The griffin scowled. "And of course there are the Steel Rangers, who are also after the same prizes. And before you start getting any wrong ideas, let me warn you: the Steel Rangers have adopted a slaughter first attitude towards anyone that stands in their way of reclaiming old Stable-Tec property for themselves. They will slaughter you just as quickly as they will slaughter us. And in those rare cases where the Stables have still-living residents, they usually slaughter them too. At least Red Eye gives them the same options he gives you."

My eyes went wide, my jaw dropping. *Luna rape them with Her horn!*

"You work two years on a Stable Recovery Team and survive, and Red Eye promises you freedom. You'll be tagged and will be allowed to live whatever life you chose." The griffin gave a knowing smirk, "So long as you don't decide to become a bother."

Two years. That… was not an option. But I wasn't really thinking about that. I was thinking about how Blueberry Sabre and I were going to have some very, very harsh words. I was already considering what ammo to use as punctuation.

Curling her second claw, Stern continued, "You can work in the Fillydelphia crater.

Red Eye has need of radioactive materials, and that crater is a treasure trove of them." If Blueberry Sabre was to be believed, and it would have been stupid for her to lie about my objectives, then I knew why Red Eye was mining the crater. He needed material for his Rad-Engine. But working at ground zero of a megaspell strike… even in radiation-protective barding, that was a death sentence!

"Red Eye has stated that any pony who works for six months' worth of full work days in the Fillydelphia Crater will be treated for radiation sickness and freed." A falsely kind smile crossed her beak. "But since he is such a charitable stallion, Red Eye has recently reduced it to only four months." I suspected most ponies suffered fatal poisoning within three.

"Your third option," Stern informed us, holding up the remaining talon, "Is to fight in The Pit. The Pit is arena combat, pony against pony. Each Event has six rounds, and there is usually an Event once every week. More if Red Eye himself graces us with his presence."

The griffin stared down at us, assessing the pathetic herd of new slaves. "If you survive six consecutive events, not only do you gain your beloved freedom, but you gain an honored place in Red Eye's army!" She stood up tall, glowering. "But frankly, none of you lot look worthy of such an honor."

The black-bodied griffin snorted. "Still, I am honor-bound to give you the option. Just try not to make it too easy for your opponent if you do." Then, scowling yet again at us, she warned, "These are the ways to earn your freedom. But there are two more ways to gain it. You may, at any time, choose to join the Unity. If you do, your fate will be in the hooves of the *Goddess,*" she said the word as if it was distasteful. "Or, of course, you can gain freedom through death.

"Try anything stupid, try to rebel, try to fight, try to run… any of those are fine ways to die horribly." Stern fixed us all with a stare. "But that is *all* they are."

* * *

Welcome to the Fillydelphia FunFarm!

A weathered, oversized image of Pinkie Pie's head and forehooves peeked over the top of the arched, wrought-iron gateway. Beyond lay the decaying ruins of what had once been a massive amusement park. I remembered it from the poster in SteelHooves' shack. ("Everything the Grand Galloping Gala should have been! Every day! Forever!")

We were herded through the gateway. A fair bulk of the old amusement park had been converted into the slaves' quarters. I had been assigned a straw mat somewhere in an enclosure where ponies once galloped around in mock-ups of plow wagons, ramming into each other for fun. (Being new, I didn't rate four walls, only a roof. And I was told to be glad for that. The rain in Fillydelphia, they warned me, burned.)

On the path up to the gateway, I had spotted slaves harnessed to actual plow wagons, pushing mounds of rubble as they pulled a chariot behind them, carrying the slave master pony who whipped them if they weren't going fast enough. Or if the slave master liked the sounds the poor pony made when struck brutally with the lash. Or if she was just bored.

I wondered if any of those tortured ponies spent their nights sleeping in the Bumper-Plow Pit. Sometimes, irony sucked.

Once, colts and fillies would drag their parents from miles around to romp and play in the silly rides and spectacles the Fillydelphia FunFarm provided. Now it was a monstrous monument to slavery and death, wrapped in garish, peeling paint.

Pinkie Pie wouldn't approve.

Above us, three Pinkie Pie Balloons floated, in constant orbit over the decayed amusement park. One moved freely. The other two were anchored, one apiece, to the two tallest buildings still standing within the curtain of The Wall. The first was leashed to an old hotel, beaten but unbroken, which towered just a few blocks beyond the eastern edge of the Fillydelphia FunFarm. The huge lettering on the twentieth-floor balcony was nearly rusted away and had long ago lost its lighting; but even without it, I would have recognized the Alpha-Omega Hotel from its small picture in that old news article I'd seen a couple days ago.

The second Pinkie Pie Balloon was bound to a building rising out of the FunFarm itself. It was clearly stylized as a barn, looking like nothing so much as a colossal version of the old building on Sweet Apple Acres. The first floors were covered in gaily-colored murals and fairytale characters, most of which had slid from the Precipice of Childlike Frivolity into the Valley of Disturbing Imagery. The roller coaster that looped all about the amusement park actually passed through the building on the sixth floor. A huge radio tower jutted up from the top, modified to look like a comically oversized weathervane.

I realized that I was looking at the Fillydelphia Hub of the Ministry of Morale.

I should have known. Pinkie Pie and her Ministry had created the sprite-bots. The source of the sprite-bots' broadcast had to be a Ministry Hub somewhere. It wasn't powerful enough to reach all the way to Manehattan, but with each sprite-bot re-broadcasting the signal, the Ministry of Morale's reach had been effectively infinite. When Red Eye had taken the Hub, he had simply added his sermons to the playlist. The music itself was the same songs that the Ministry of Morale had been broadcasting since before the war.

As if mocking me for my revelation, the plucky harpsichord number playing over the speakers suffered a sudden influx of lyrics:

"You gotta share. You gotta care. It's the right thing to do!"

I really, really wanted a gun.

"Oh look," called out a blood-red mare whose dark green mane was done up in spikes. She was lounging on the spectator railing of the Bumper-Plow arena. "Fresh meat!"

The slave master ponies walking with us took their leave. Gnash gave me a parting look that I couldn't interpret. Then we were alone with the other slaves. Many paid us no mind. Most that even spared us a glance did so with sad, resigned expressions.

I felt sickened at the sight of several of them – many were shedding their manes and coats, revealing boils or discolored flesh beneath, or suffered from withered limbs or sloughing facial features – the slowly dying victims of radiation poisoning.

And then there were the bullies.

The blood-red mare slid from the railing and stalked towards us. "Listen up, my little grubworms," she barked. Her cutie mark looked like an eyeball on a pike. I shuddered, wondering just how you end up getting *that* as a cutie mark. Blueberry Sabre had warned that I might have more to fear from the inmates than the guards.

Another pony joined her: a hulking, piss-colored male pony with an ugly scar and the cutie mark of a very angry yellow flower. (I got the absurd feeling that the flower wanted to kill me.)

The school in Stable Two had bullies, and these ponies reminded me of them. No matter how powerless we all were, they could find power by making the rest of us even more miserable. It was contemptible at best. With everypony suffering, I felt it was vile that some of the slaves themselves would go out of their way to make it worse for others. I had learned that best way to gain strength was through friendship. Shouldn't we all be working together? But… this was faster and easier for the selfish.

"I'm Blood," the appropriately-colored mare with the spiked mane announced. Then, introducing the over-muscled buck, "And this is Daff." The lug stared at us, his eyes lingering on the mares.

"I know y'all just heard Stern's big spiel 'bout how Fillydelphia is *her* town," Blood said. (Which I bet she wouldn't have dared if the griffin was anywhere nearby.) "Well the Bumper-Plow Pit is *our* domain!"

"What a glorious empire you have there," I snarked under my breath before I could stop myself.

Blood looked like she'd been slapped. "Ex-cuuuuse me?" She trotted up, eyes narrowing. "Did you just talk? Because it sounded like you talked, but I don't remember telling you to."

Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut? Well, at least maybe if she kicked the crap outta me, she'd manage to crush all the biting bugs in my coat while she was at it.

Then again… maybe it was a good thing that I'd gotten her attention. If I became the bullies' new chew-toy, then that would spare the other slaves at least some of their attentions. I'd faced a dragon; I could take the crap these two could dish.

Okay, I ran away from a dragon. But that's just getting nitpicky.

"Well, did you just talk?" Blood demanded sticking her snout against mine. She had to lower her head a little to do so, something I could see she enjoyed. My small stature made me a particularly appealing target.

"I… I just said… what a glorious empire you have. You know… with the crumbling amusement park ride," I stammered, cringing back. "You must be s-so proud!"

Her eyes widened. "Oh… you. Are. *Begging.* Me to mess you up." She lifted up a hoof and brought it down on the chain of my manacles, driving my face into the dirt. "Okay, filly, this is life from now on. You speak when I tell you to speak. You lick where I tell you to lick. And you give me half of your food rations every night. And maybe, just maybe, I'll keep you for myself rather than letting Daff here have you every Luna-damned night until he splits you in two!"

I looked up at her, putting on a pitiful expression.

"Daff," she called back to the piss-colored brute. "Fuck her up bad!"

The lumbering buck approached me with a nasty grin. "With pleasure!" He spun and kicked. HARD!

Pain exploded through my breast. I found myself flying back through the air. I crashed through the rotted remains of what had once been a hot dog stand (with a picture of Pinkie Pie slathering on the mustard).

I was struggling to get onto my feet when he slammed into me at full gallop, sending me sprawling. I thought I heard a rib crack. Breathing was becoming painful.

The buck trotted up to me as I fought to catch my breath and reared up. Without armor, I was afraid he'd break my back, so I twisted. He compensated, his hooves coming down in my stomach, knocking any wind I had out of me. I coughed, tasting blood.

The huge buck positioned himself over me.

My horn glowed softly as I wrapped a very tender part of him in a telekinetic sheath and gave him a warning squeeze.

Daff stopped abruptly.

"Here's the deal," I whispered, half moaning in pain. "You decide I'm not worthy of your… attentions. That way, you get to save face. And in return, I don't show you just how good I am at this particular trick." I squeezed a little harder and the buck jolted with pain, sweating now. "And you keep… yourself… to yourself and away from all the other slaves, or the deal's off." A slight bit tighter and Daff nodded fervently, tears spilling from his eyes as he tried not to scream.

"Deal?" I asked, even though I knew he had already agreed as I gave the telekinetic field a slight twist. His reaction was utterly worth it.

"Good," I growled, my mouth tasting of warm copper. I released him, dropping my head back as my vision swam. I needed a medical pony. I needed Velvet Remedy.

Shaking himself, Daff made a show of staring me up and down, then dismissing me with a huff. "Fuck that!" he said too loudly. "She's so tiny it would be like fucking a kid!" He turned around. Blood was looking at him with one eye narrowed in disbelief.

Daff glanced back over his shoulder at me, snorted, apparently deciding what he could and couldn't get away with. He drove his right hindhoof back with a gruesomely hard half-buck that landed directly between my hindlegs. Then trotted away, basking in the blood-colored mare's obvious approval.

I'd never screamed so hard in my life.

⁂

> *"I have walked through the streets of Fillydelphia, cleared of rubble, and seen the steel mill producing steel, the textiles mill producing cloth, the power plant producing power."*

Red Eye's voice sounded proud through the tinny speakers on steel poles that jutted into the ruddy evening air.

> *"It is a start, but such a glorious start. And we owe it all… to each other."*

"What is this?" I asked, half whimpering, as a bowl of indescribable mushy stuff was shoved in front of my nose. The smell made my deeply bruised stomach convulse in revulsion.

"Oatmeal," the slave pony claimed flatly, scooping up a bowl full of the same discolored glop for the next pony.

"Oatmeal? Are you crazy?" I stared in disbelief. "This doesn't look anything like oatmeal! Or smell. Or…" I added as another portion of the muck sloughed from ladle to bowl, "…sound."

I gave half of the "oatmeal" to Blood, feeling like I was the one being cruel. Then I limped around until I found another pony who had been bullied out of his share and gave him the rest. I was in too much pain in tender places, including my stomach, to attempt eating anyway.

In turn, he gave me very depressing advice on continued existence as a "worker" in Fillydelphia. Don't choose the Crater. Most ponies who go there don't live even three months, much less four. Don't choose the Pit. You'll have to survive as many as thirty-six battles against other slaves to make it, and the battles were always to the death. I moaned at that. I couldn't see myself taking the life of another slave. Well, maybe Blood and Daff. But not the innocent ones.

He himself worked in the scrapyards, using a tool he called an auto-axe to cut apart chariots and other large hunks of metal for melting down in the steel mill. It was dangerous work, and they were kept under supervision by guards in high places, but there weren't any whips. No slave master was going to get into a scrapyard with a slave wielding a spinning blade magically enchanted to slash easily through metal.

He regaled me with the many ways to die in Fillydelphia. One of the least pleasant was the work pits I had seen on the way in. "But fortunately," he said, "Those are reserved fer ponies who try t' escape, or worse, sabotage Red Eye's work."

"What are they?"

"Fillydelphia has a bit o' a parasprite problem," the pony told me as he ate the remainder of my glop. "Apparently, there was a massive infestation maybe three or four decades before the megaspells. S'posedly, they wiped it out, but parasprites are really persistent."

He licked the bowl while I tried not to gag.

"Couple years back, Red Eye's bucks were blasting their way inta one of the Stables that was pretty close t' the crater and cleared open a pocket full of the damn things, all irradiated t' hell and nastier than ever."

"Bloatsprites?" I asked, but he shook his head.

"Naw, bloatsprites is what happena t' the parasprites that get themselves tainted. Big an' mean, but don't tend t' reproduce. An' that's a blessin', y' trust me on that." I looked at me gravely. "These little buggers are irradiated. Big difference."

"So… what do they do?"

"Same thing they've always done. Eat an' spit out more," the pony fixed me with a stare. "Only now they're carnivorous."

They eat… ponies? Oh Celestia!

"And those chimneys?"

The buck cocked his head. "Well, that's where we incinerate the nests they find. Only way t' make sure they stop reproducin' is to kill 'em with fire." He scowled, "Problem is, sometimes there are ones deep in the nests that don't get properly cooked by the exterminators. They wake up from the heat, fly out… the mesh over the work pits makes sure they don't get too far, an' one o' the guards always has a flamethrower. Especially after that one mare had one o' them buggies fly inta her throat. They ate her from the inside out."

Pure nightmare fuel. I really wished I could unhear that.

But as bad as that was, on the top of his list of ways to die was Unity.

"Ah know what that bastard Red Eye says, but Ah've known plenty o' ponies who volunteered fer Unity, and not one of ’em ever came back,” he confided in me. “Accordin’ t’ some ponies, the Goddess, whatever that’s s’posed t’ be, is turnin’ them into those big alicorn critters we sometimes see hereabouts. But if that was true, then Ah figure there would be a lot more o’ them. And you’d think one would bother t’ come back an’ say hello t’ old friends, bein’ as they c’n fly an’ all.”

I didn’t think it helpful to tell him that there were probably more of them than he thought. My mind was already processing the other information. The pseudo-goddesses had no cutie marks and were at least guided through a telepathic source. My mind reeled at the possibility that transformation removed their individuality and sense of self completely. Doing that to a pony would be… worse than murder!

⁂

Night was chilly, and I had no blanket. I lay on the rat-chewed old mat which had been bed to slaves before me, most of whom were probably dead now. The mat was so worn it felt harder than the cement beneath it, and so stained that I didn’t really want to touch it. But it was all I had.

My body was badly bruised, and it still ached to breathe. My rib had been cracked but thankfully not broken. I tried wholeheartedly to ignore the worst of the lower pain. Part of me wanted to kill Daff as painfully and bloodily as possible. Part of me wanted to curl up and cry. I fought down both. Considering what I did and threatened to do to the piss-colored bastard, I think part of me wanted to show that I could take what I was willing to dish out. Mostly, though, I had told him he could save face; and as much as I hated it, I had to acknowledge that is exactly what he did.

The sky above was black with reflected tinges of orange and red. With the fall of night, all the forges and fires and other glowing things were more pronounced, giving the Fillydelphia Ruins an infernal cast. The worst was the subtle red tinge to the air that became a luminescent glow within the massive pit where the megaspell-carrying missile had struck, missing the massive industrial sectors of the city to find the heart of the civilian housing. Darkness never truly fell in the core of the Fillydelphia Crater.

A gust of wind brought a deeper chill and a choking, acrid smell with it from somewhere deeper in Fillydelphia. A few of the other slaves coughed in their sleep. I shivered and tried to breathe without inhaling.

I missed my friends. I wondered if they were okay. In my mind, I had begun playing through all the mistakes I had made, all the ways my plan could have gone wrong…

Somewhere not far away, I caught sight of a small burst of green flame.

Getting up, I slipped quietly out, bringing up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle to help me find the balefire phoenix. My heart felt thankful for the company as I spotted her perched on a sign shaped like a smiling Pinkie Pie holding up a hoof. (“You must be this tall to ride the FunFarm Wheel.”) Behind her, the massive iron structure of the wheel rose above the park like a mechanical eye, watching us balefully.

Pyrelight hooted musically at me.

“Thank you,” I told her earnestly. I didn’t think I could make it through this trial alone.

I considered asking her questions, or requesting that she ferry a message to Velvet

Remedy, or half a dozen other things that I dismissed in turn. Instead, I chose to just sit there, resting my head against the two-dimensional Pinkie Pie, and enjoying her company.

* * *

"Well, let's put you to work," Mister Shiny said, looking me over. Mister Shiny was the slave master pony in charge of assigning work to new slaves, and I thought he had a deceptively kindly voice. "I see you've got a PipBuck, and you should be tagged for a visit to Doctor Slaughter, but I figure we can hold off on that." He gave me a smile that seemed personable but had no real warmth. "What do you say we put that thing to use instead?"

I was still terribly sore and walked with a slight limp, but he didn't seem to notice, or at least not care. I was sure he'd put ponies to work who were in much worse shape. "What do I have to do?"

"Well, there's a building in town that's been infested with parasprites. But this time, we can't just go in with flamethrowers. So we could use a pony with a PipBuck," Mister Shiny explained. "That thing can spot targets for you, right? We'll send you in there in environmental barding and with a low-powered magical energy gun. Shoot the damn things until they're piles of ash."

"How… how many are there?" The fretful nightmares of the night before replayed themselves in my mind.

"Shouldn't be more than fifty. They haven't had anything to snack on since the infestation was discovered, poor Whitetail."

Within half an hour, he had me equipped and ready to go. Except for ammo. I'd get that after I entered the building. They'd shove it through a mail slot.

* * *

Beams of bright magenta magical energy lanced through the air at me from the security turret in the hallway ceiling. One of the blasts struck my environmental suit, melting a hole in it the size of a hoof just below my cutie mark and burning my flesh underneath. As I threw myself behind a desk, I hoped it wouldn't scar like the slash on my neck.

The terminal on the desk glowed softly, that same sickly pale green that almost all of them did. I hid myself behind it as I began to hack the system. It only took me a moment; the terminal's security was pathetic. And I was in luck! The terminal could shut down the turrets.

The turret let loose another barrage of pink energy. Several lancing bolts struck the backside of the terminal. It exploded in my face with a blast of sparks.

I would have been permanently blinded, if not outright killed, had the environmental suit not included a gas mask and heavy goggles. I cringed back behind the desk and considered my options.

Until now, the bug hunt was more frustrating than dangerous. The barding had made me effectively immune to the parasprites, and I had become so practiced in the art of stealth that I could sneak up right behind one before the half-blind things spotted me.

Which was good, since I had almost no skill with magical energy weapons. Even at close range, even with S.A.T.S., I missed as often as I hit.

As the turret spewed out another barrage, a little yellow parasprite flew towards me, drawn by the smell of my burned flesh. I slipped into S.A.T.S. as it drew close, aiming the laser and firing. I hit it with the third shot, and it disintegrated in a flash of turquoise ash. I dropped the targeting spell and then kicked it back up a second later to help me take down two more parasprites (one of which was approximately the color of dead flesh).

"I think I'm in trouble."

I checked the magical spark pack. Those second two had taken me five shots to vaporize. Better, but still not good. According to my PipBuck's initial scan, there were fifty-two parasprites in the building that I had to wipe out, and I had just killed parasprites numbered nineteen through twenty-one. That left thirty-one more to go, most of which I knew were swarming around the building's factory floor – an area I had been avoiding, choosing to clear out the rest of the building first. Only now they smelled flesh.

I had seven shots left.

"Really in trouble."

The turret poured out even more magical energy, trying to strike me down, not smart enough to realize there was a whole big metal desk in the way. The desk was getting warm to the touch.

If I didn't find more ammo in this place… or, even better, another weapon…

I opened the desk, just to check.

Bottle caps. Three of them. I let out a scream of frustration.

I looked around, spotting a door marked "maintenance" nearby. Wrapping the desk in a field of levitation, I carried it alongside me as shield while I dashed for the door. It was locked.

I still didn't have a screwdriver. Looking towards the heavens, "If either of you two are actually up there, I'm really sorry for doubting. Really sorry. I apologize! Now… could you please send me a break?"

The turret fired again. The desk was no longer just warm. It was beginning to radiate heat. Three more parasprites flew into the room, drawn to my smell.

"Well then fuck you too. Both of you!" I shouted upwards. "Go lick each other's…" I slid into S.A.T.S. and sent a flurry of targeting spell-guided shots at the parasprites. Two turned to ash. The third was struck, falling to the floor but not dying. The other shots missed. And now I was out. I panted, my rib injury burning and making it hurt to breathe.

Dammit!

The turret fired again. The desk was now glowing. In frustration, I snapped, "You want this so much? Here! Take it!" Keeping the desk between me and the turret, I floated it up to the offending machine and slammed at it over and over until it stopped working with a crunch.

I then floated it past me the other way, flipping it over and dropping the glowing metal surface on the wounded blue bug.

I managed to close myself in an office above the building's main floor. The hallway that the turret had been protecting had lead to this room – the equivalent of an Overmare's office. There was a small door on one side that probably lead to a closet and massive plate-glass windows that looked out over the main work area. I stared out one of the windows at the mass of cute, colorful predators swarming between the catwalks above and the printing presses below.

Same aesthetic, I noted dourly. It was like the world before had a hard-on for industrial accidents.

I also now understood why going in with flamethrowers was not so much an option. This building was a printing house. And a lot of it was full of books, posters… a veritable cornucopia of fuel for an out-of-control fire. Such a fire would probably destroy the very things I was sure Red Eye was after: the presses.

I had to applaud the stallion. He had power, steel, textiles… and now he was working on bringing back mass publication. As far as I could tell, the only book that had been written and distributed on any significant scale since the apocalypse was *The Wasteland Survival Guide.* Getting this place running would be a major step forward.

Those schools he was promising suddenly began to look real.

I spotted several more automated turrets covering the main work floor. Damn things ignored the bugs, but I knew that they'd attack if I so much as stepped a hoof into that room. I was in no shape to deal with that many parasprites, much less the damn turrets.

The room had a desk with a still-functioning terminal. I sat down and began to hack, hoping that I could turn off any other turrets from here. The password, interestingly, was "Generous Souls".

```
Welcome to the Ministry of Image, Fillydelphia Hub, Miss Periwinkle!
  How are you this fine morning?
  It has been 202 Years, 37 Days, 1 Hour and 13 Minutes since your last
log-in.
  Would you like to check your messages?
```

Wait… this was a Hub? But… there wasn't anything here! It was a small building, little more than a print shop. There was nothing here.

That… made no sense. This wasn't a tower; it was two stories tall. And I'd seen enough of the building to be pretty sure it didn't have secret sublevels. There weren't many offices, nothing more than what would be expected from a small publishing house.

I got up and started looking around. There were posters on the walls of the office, and many more visible down on the printing floor below. I had seen most of them before. Everything from the "PROGRESS" posters of the Ministry of Wartime Technology to the image of Twilight Sparkle above the words "Reading is Magic" (the poster I had seen in the Ponyville Library, only without the disfiguring graffiti).

I glanced back to the terminal and noticed something else. On the desk was an old album. I opened it and began magically flipping through the pages, all full of collected scraps: old newspaper articles, flyers, public notifications. Most were decayed beyond readability. Of those that weren't, many were familiar. The clinic warning about Wartime Stress Disorder, for example.

One of the barely-readable newspaper articles caught my eye:

> **Dragon Over Hoofington**
>
> *The Shadowbolts, lead by Rainbow Dash, engaged the dragon Brimstone over the skies of Hoofington last weekend as zebra forces managed their deepest strike into Equestria in the War's thirteen year history. All rumors that the zebras have enlisted the aid of the dragons native to their homeland have been confirmed. Princess Luna vows to expand Equestria's pegasus…*

The rest was supposedly continued on another page. The rest of this one was a picture of Rainbow Dash standing proudly on the head of the fallen monster.

It was the sort of image that would have branded Rainbow Dash as a national hero in the minds of ponies for generations.

I closed the book and looked back at the screen. And I began to understand.

I thought back to the Pinkie Pie poster that first alerted me to the existence of the Ministries. If I had been asked, I would have said that the Ministry of Morale had been the first one I had seen.

I would have been wrong.

The *Ministry of Image* was the first one I had seen. Only it hadn't gone by that name. It almost never went by that name, at least not externally. In fact, I suspected that *Principles of Proper Pony Speech* was supposed to be an internal document.

The Ministry of Image didn't seem to do projects of its own. It worked in service to the *other* Ministries. It created their materials, their books, their posters, their flyers… and in one case even their *armor.* Every poster associated with one of the other Ministries… hell, probably every time I had seen or heard anything from any of them, I was seeing the Ministry of Image.

The invisible Ministry… that was everywhere.

* * *

I downloaded Miss Periwinkle's messages into my PipBuck for later perusal, then moved on to the more pressing task of dealing with the turrets. I had hoped I could turn off the turrets through the terminal in what I considered the Overmare's office. But the terminal had allowed me to do one better. It allowed me to reprogram the turrets to wipe out the parasprites!

I crouched behind the desk, listening to the barrage of turret-fire fill the main floor of the M.I. Hub. The parasprite kill-count on my PipBuck had shot up to thirty-nine and was only now beginning to slow. I realized I would have to hunt down the last ones, the ones in rooms and spaces the turrets didn't cover. But suddenly my job was a lot easier.

My luck just kept improving. There was a bathroom off to the side of this office. The toilet water made my PipBuck freak, and the sink was completely non-functional… a plumber pony had been working on it when the megaspell hit. Her skeleton was still in the room; she had been killed by a chunk that fell from the ceiling.

There wasn't much left of her maintenance uniform, but it was enough to patch the hole in my environmental suit with the aid of wonderglue. And there had been several bottles of the latter in the pony's toolbox. Along with a wrench and (squee!) a screwdriver!

There had also been a feebly locked medical box with a few healing bandages and a couple extra bobby pins. And a tin of Mint-als.

I stared at the tin for the longest time, fighting the urge to just go ahead and take one. Just one.

It took effort to shut the box, leaving them inside. I relocked it. Never again.

I was finally out of those damn shackles! I'd noticed that most of the other slaves weren't wearing them, so I was fairly certain that I could get away with not wearing them. But if I hadn't gotten them off myself, I suspected there wasn't anypony here with both the know-how and kindness to have helped me out.

I really hated Fillydelphia.

The turret fire stopped. To be on the safe side, I shut them down completely before stepping out of the office. My PipBuck said I had five to go. And I was still out of ammo. I needed a plan.

Moving back the way I had arrived, I tried unlocking the maintenance room I had been kept out of earlier. With any luck, there would be more magical spark packs inside.

The door clicked open, but my streak of luck had ended. There were no magical spark packs. No weapons or ammo of any kind. Instead, there was the skeleton of a pegasus pony who had locked himself inside, alone with a now-empty bottle of buck and a case of painkillers. From the position of the skeleton and the disarray of the room, I suspected he died in severe convulsions… but hopefully unable to feel them.

There were a few posters, well preserved, on the wall of this room that I had never seen before. A rather fantastic poster for a pegasi aerial acrobatics team called the "Wonderbolts" whose bright blue uniforms were clearly copied from the darker, militaristic Shadowbolts design.

Or was it the other way around? A framed newspaper article on the wall read:

> **Wonderbolts' Heroic Attempt to Free Zebra Captives Leaves Four Dead**
>
> *This morning, Princess Celestia announced the successful rescue of the seventeen ponies held captive for two weeks by Zebra gem pirates. The Wonderbolts, Equestria's greatest fliers, volunteered for the secret mission that sent them into Zebra waters. However, success came at a grave cost as four members of the elite pegasi team were killed in the ensuing battle. Thankfully, none of the captives were killed and only one received serious injury.*
>
> *Throughout this two-week crisis, the Zebra Caesar repeatedly denounced the actions of the pirates and offered support to Princess Celestia; but He denied permission for Equestrian ponies to enter Zebra territories, claiming it would "increase existing tensions" and insisting that His army's intelligence indicated that the pirates were operating in international seas. The Zebra Caesar continues to disavow any knowledge of where the pirates' ship had anchored.*
>
> *Princess Celestia claims that the Wonderbolts' operation in Zebra territory was the result of a "happy miscommunication" and apologized personally to the Caesar…*

The article clearly pre-dated the beginning of the war. One more thing to think about later, when I wasn't trying to find a way to disintegrate parasprites without a magical energy weapon, or incinerate them without fire.

The maintenance room included a workbench, and a variety of odds and ends, including the buck's "Wonderbolts" lunchbox and a sack filled with somepony's badly-decayed porn collection. Mostly, old copies of *Wingboner Magazine.* I managed not to look. No, really.

Okay, maybe just a little. Pegasus mares are kinda… exotic, after all.

Inspiration struck. I dumped out the magazines and set the sack aside. Then I emptied the lunchbox of the muck that the food inside had rotted into. I brought up the schematic that Ditzy Doo had given me as a gift. I didn't really expect a homemade mine would be any good against parasprites, but that didn't mean I wouldn't find a use for one later.

I was about to put my new mine into the sack when I had another idea. I couldn't set the damn pony-eating bugs on fire inside the building, but…

Half an hour later, I trotted out of the printing house, a sack full of angry parasprites floating next to me.

"Oh, Pyrelight!" I sing-songed with a smile.

* * *

Mister Shiny was most impressed, and I felt myself flush with pride. Only for the pride to be swiftly followed by shame and anger that I was letting myself feel happy about slave work. And worse, thankful to one of the slavers for praising me.

The reward for my efforts was to have the magical energy gun taken from me, but in return he offered me a set of ragged slave barding. It offered little protection, but little was better than none, and it would help against the chilly nights. The former wearer, according to Mister Shiny, was no longer able to use it due to decapitation.

Working swiftly did not lead to rest but to more work. I was assigned to the scrap yard for the rest of the day. I spent all of ten minutes getting instructions on the use of a gruesome-looking auto axe before the yard foreman, a slave himself, decided he just didn't want such a dangerous tool in the hooves of such as small and weak-looking mare. I pointed out that, as a unicorn, I was more than capable of wielding the metal-cutting saw regardless of my physical size or strength. In response, he put me to work gathering the bits of scrap that the other workers (slaves, dammit!) were slicing off of old passenger wagons and other sizable metal artifacts of the past.

I trudged into the ear-splitting din of the scrap yard. Dozens of ponies were pitting those spinning, magically-edged blades against metal. At least a dozen more were on scrap collection duty. I looked up to see the slaver guards staring down at us, armed with battle saddles or assault carbines, keeping well out of range of the auto-axes. A daring unicorn could try to float one up at them, but she would be gunned down before she could kill more than one. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the gorgeous yellow and green plumage of Pyrelight as she circled, a Wonderbolts lunchbox clutched in her talons, before soaring out of sight.

Smiling to myself a little, despite my dreary situation, I got to work.

Enslaved ponies, crying out under the whips of the slavers, pulled wagons piled with scavenged metal into the steel yard for slicing. I was shocked when several ponies trudged wearily into the scrapyard, pulling a wagon laden with the massive gear-shaped steel door from a Stable.

My work was much easier than theirs thanks to my magic. And it afforded me the chance to speak with the other slaves. They were not a chatty bunch, quick to remind me that too much talk made the slavers nervous and was a quick way to get your tongue cut out. But I was still able to glean a few tidbits which convinced me that the only places likely to find either the schematics of the Rad-Engine or Red Eye's research into Bypass Spells were the Alpha-Omega Hotel or the Ministry of Morale hub.

The Alpha-Omega was being used to for "special housing". For the lower floors, this meant housing for Pit fighters. Being on the fast track to brutal death at the hooves of other slaves didn't come without compensations: a much nicer place to bed down, shorter work hours, and (if rumors were true) access to a still. Who, or what, was housed in the upper floors was apparently a closely guarded secret.

"Ta only other place t' get booze in alla Fillydelphia," one of the slaves claimed as she let her auto-axe cool down before going again at a three-yard long section of what had once been a Stable wall, "Iz the Roamer Bar. Uh slaver hangout on ta other side of ta Wall." A shame, as I decided that I could definitely use some apple whiskey. "Stern hates ta stuff. Sayz booze makes slavers stupid an' she ain't got uh use fo' stupid."

The slave mare with the really strange accent chomped down on the bit of the auto-axe, kicking it on again, and started cutting. I hung around long enough to bundle the first chunks cut from the wall, and floated them back to the waiting bins. Then I moved on.

From the ponies willing to talk, everything about the comically barn-shaped MoM building was a mystery save that there was always a Pinkie Pie Balloon anchored there, that Stern roosted in the upper tower and that Red Eye himself had private chambers somewhere within.

I found myself speaking with another of the slaves, this time a unicorn buck with a cancerous eye and only three legs (the result not of an accident or cruelty but a birth defect from having been born to a tribe who had lived too close to the Fillydelphia Crater before The Wall). Our conversation was interrupted when, one by one, the slaves paused their work to look up into the sky of black clouds. Several pointed. Many whispered.

I turned my own head upward, trying to spot the cause of the commotion. It wasn't hard to spot. A sky chariot was flying overhead, pulled by two griffins. Surrounding it was a wing of alicorns.

"Whelp…" the deformed buck muttered, "Looks like Red Eye's here."

* * *

I stood in the same lot where I had stood yesterday The blood of the slaver executed by Stern still stained the ground. All around me, other slaves had gathered, pressing close. The rooftops around us were lined with griffins in Talon armor. Stern took her favorite spot and stared out over us. Her anti-machine rifle was slung to her back, but I remembered the speed of her draw.

The speakers fell silent, *March of the Parasprites* cutting off in mid-song.

A couple of the ponies beside me whinnied nervously. I spotted Blood and Daff in the crowd. Blood looked bored, inspecting her hoof. Daff looked grim.

And then I finally saw him. Red Eye.

Flanked by an escort of Alicorns, the pony whom I had come to blame for a great deal of the Equestrian Wasteland's wrongness walked up from a ramp on the right side of the building where Stern was perched.

Red Eye was a strong, able-bodied earth pony stallion with a crimson coat and a few light scars around a blank flank where his cutie mark should have been. He had a jet black mane and tail which were practically groomed, and he wore a black cape that was slung to droop off his right side. I could only see the left side of his body clearly as he strode towards the center of the roof, but his left eye was distinctly blue.

I wasn't sure what I had been expecting. Hell, I think I had been expecting an alicorn monster the size of a Pinkie Pie Balloon, twisted and evil, radiating explosions of power. Or something equally as absurd.

Red Eye was… just a pony.

I could end this all now! I just needed something big and heavy. I could float it over his head and drop it. Even if the griffins spotted me, even if Stern gunned me down, I could accept that just so long as I could take him with me.

One of the alicorns looked out over the crowd, her eyes quickly finding me. She spread her wings and took to the air, keeping a protective watch. Dammit. They remembered, and they weren't going to let me pull the same trick twice.

I realized with a chill that the alicorns knew I was here. And so did their Goddess. Which, I suspected, meant Red Eye did too.

This was a *stupid* plan.

In the middle of the roof was a strip of railing which had once held a sign. Red Eye trod up to it, the other two alicorns taking positions on either side of him. He turned towards us, putting his forehooves up spread out on the railing as he stared down. I gasped, my world suddenly lurching out from under my hooves.

"Workers! Welcome, and thank you for joining me." Red Eye was even more charismatic in person, his words oily smooth and devilishly persuasive. But I was barely hearing them, my gaze transfixed on the red glow that came out of the metal sheath around what should have been his right eye socket.

A *cyberpony?*

Red Eye was a cyberpony!? I was staring in the face of a level of technological advancement that soared way beyond terminals and sprite-bots. Red Eye had cybernetic implants! How? Where did he get them? When did that sort of technology even become possible?

My gaze traveled down his body, searching for other signs of augmentation, and locked on his right foreleg. Red Eye was wearing a PipBuck!

Red Eye was a Stable Dweller.

"I have demanded a lot from you in the name of the future," Red Eye was saying as I shook myself out of my utter stupor. The crimson cyber-augmented stallion even wore his PipBuck on his right foreleg, which was uncommon. Just like me.

"But I would not call for anything from you that I would not demand from myself," Red Eye claimed, looking over us. The red beam of that targeting eye flashed as it swept over me.

"As you can see, I was gifted, through no merit of my own, with a privileged upbringing that the good ponies of our Equestrian Wasteland could only dream of. I lived in a Stable where such luxuries as safety, food and clean water were taken for granted. Our water talisman alone could have given life-sustaining nourishment to thousands, but was instead being used for frivolous joys like our atrium's fountain."

He frowned, shaking his head. "Observe my eye. My Stable offered medical and technological advancements far in excess of even pre-war civilization. Ponies in the highest ranks of Stable-Tec conspired to make my Stable an experiment in rulership through the earth pony way…"

Celestia suckle me!

Stable Two had always known a unicorn Overmare. I tried to imagine a Stable under earth pony rule and driven by the same push for progress and industry that had dominated the thinking of Ministry of Technology. What could they accomplish over two hundred years of isolation?

Well, cybernetic implants, for one.

I realized I had lost track of Red Eye's speech, and chided myself for not paying closer attention now that he was actually right in front of me. But I couldn't help the oozing sense that I was looking into a dark and supremely fucked-up mirror.

"…saw the Equestrian Wasteland for what it is. But more than that, I saw what it should be. And what it could be again! That night, for the first time, the Goddess whispered to me…"

I found myself resisting a facehoof. The idea that the alicorn's Goddess was speaking to Red Eye, or at least that he could be under that impression, made a lot more sense. I knew a pony in Stable Two who would sometimes pick up the Stable broadcast through metal-work in his jaw. Celestia only knew what all that wetware in Red Eye's head was capable of receiving, by intentional design or otherwise. The Goddess communicated telepathically with the alicorns. Was she communicating with him too? Or was he just picking up stray signals?

Preacher had suggested to Velvet Remedy that Red Eye was getting garbled messages.

"…And the first thing that She showed me was how wrong my Stable's teachings were. How actually repulsive our beliefs in earth pony supremacy. No breed of pony is greater than another. We are all slaves to the Equestrian Wasteland. And it is only through our work that we can be free."

As Red Eye talked, I remembered the twisted versions of stories and history that I had seen in Stable Twenty-Four. Even the tale of The Mare in the Moon – the tale of Princess Luna's thousand year fall to madness as Nightmare Moon, a madness she had been rescued from by the group of friends who Luna had subsequently chosen to be the Mares of her Ministries – had been altered into the tale of a fallen *prince.* I could only guess, if this is what Stable-Tec had done to ensure a male-dominated experiment in that Stable, what the teachings in Red Eye's Stable would have been.

"But that work is worthless unless it is *shared!* Until we are all free, none of us are truly free. Nor do we deserve to be!" Red Eye glanced away, looking strangely ashamed. Then, with a fierceness I hadn't expected, he told us, "And that is why my Stable was the first to be dismantled. Its doors and supports torn out and melted down, its concrete walls and floors cut apart to make the foundation stones of the Cathedral, the fortress we are building on the site of my former home, to be the new capital of our New Equestria, and the new home of our living Goddess."

I reeled.

"The ponies of my home were the first to join the army of the Children of Unity. Or, in the cases of many, they became the first workers in these very yards where you work today. I saw the bounty of our Stable shared, the water talisman given to a struggling town which now knows the joy of clean and pure water. I focused the great minds of our best science ponies towards the task of the coming new age."

"The only thing that remains of my home is the cloak I wear as a reminder," Red Eye claimed, smiling down at us. "Everything I have ever had, I have given. As you do today…" His eyes, both mechanical and natural, looked over the ponies in the crowd. His voice was paternal. "And I could not be prouder of all of you."

He glanced back to Stern. The black-colored griffin nodded her white-feathered head, but her beak twisted in a scowl of dislike the moment he turned away. The alicorn in the air continued to circle, keeping her eyes out for unidentified floating objects.

Looking to us again, bathing us in his smile beneath the slate-colored clouds, Red Eye announced, "And so I come bringing the gift of respite. Tomorrow shall be a day of rest. None shall labor. Furthermore, the bounty of the Roamer Bar stills will be made freely available to you, for those who wish to taste the finest horse whisky Fillydelphia has to offer!"

The words of the leader of our slavers was met with clopping applause and shouts of joy. It was insanity. The gratitude of the crowd made as much sense as our oatmeal. I looked around and found a few ponies who were not celebrating. One of them was Daff, although Blood seemed to be cheering for the both of them.

Red Eye grinned kindly, and then waved his hoof for quiet. The roars and stomping died away uneasily, as if strangled. "And I have also arranged for entertainment. Two full Events in The Pit, with seating for everypony to enjoy!" He looked down over us. "That is, of course, if I can get some volunteers."

The quiet became a hard silence. The slave ponies looked to each other.

"And we have one!" Red Eye announced as he looked into the crowd. "Any more?"

I looked around to see which pony had volunteered for the blood sport. Daff was holding up a hoof. Blood was staring at him in shock.

Then, slowly, in a show of companionship that I thought beyond the vicious ex-raider mare, Blood stood next to the piss-colored stallion and raised her own hoof, lowering her head to sigh.

"Fuck you, Daffodil," she muttered. "I hate you so much."

Red Eye's voice counted out, "That's two!…"

⁂

Everything went to hell about an hour after Red Eye's speech.

I was making my way back towards the Bumper-Plow structure when a mare's scream jolted me into a run. The scream was coming from inside a building whose decaying paint job proclaimed "Fillydelphia FunFarm Mirror Maze and House of Wacky Reflections!" The mare screamed again, and I charged inside.

The interior of the building was dark and dusty, the air filled with motes, the floor covered in shattered glass. I levitated myself a little as I moved, not wanting to cut my hooves. The place was a maze, just as advertised, but very few of the mirror frames held anything more than a few nasty shards jutting against their backboards. Old graffiti suggested that a raider band had once used the place for "fun" of their own design.

"No! Get off me!" the mare cried out, and I skidded to a stop as I recognized the voice. It was Blood.

I heard laughter. And a buck's voice, husky and cruel, ask, "Now why shouldn't you have some fun tonight? It's only right, seeing that you're going to die in The Pit tomorrow!"

I heard a grunt that sounded like Daff. And then the sound of wood impacting pony flesh.

I trotted forward until I caught the scene reflected in the remaining third of a shattered mirror. Two slave master ponies had Blood pressed back against a wall. I could see blood flowing from her back where the jagged fragments of the mirror behind her were cutting into her tail and flanks. One of the slavers was a unicorn, and he was floating a lever-action shotgun at Blood's face as he pressed lewdly against her. The buck next to him covered her with a sawed-off shotgun almost identical to the first firearm I had ever seen.

Three more slavers were piled on Daff. One, a mare, was trying to beat him into submission with the butt of her rifle.

My heart flared with rage. I felt my nerves ignite. A pony in my head tried to remind me that I couldn't start killing slavers. That my only chance to get at Red Eye required keeping a low profile until I could get close. That I still had a lot of work to do…

…that I really didn't want to save that sadistic bitch and her rapist buckfriend anyway. What the hell was I doing risking my life, risking everything, for *them?*

And absolutely none of that mattered, as the slavers learned when the glare from my horn was matched by the light that flooded over hundreds of deadly-sharp shards of mirrored glass.

The slaver pony with the sawed-off shotgun managed to get a shot off before the room became a cuisinart. He missed.

* * *

The particularly bloody murder of five slavers was *not* going unnoticed. The one shot fired had drawn attention, and now I was running through the maze, trying desperately to figure my way out while slaver guards in heavy barding and battle saddles gave chase.

I'd left Blood and Daff alive and in shock, the corridor decorated with a scene so bloody it would have made raiders envious. I had snatched up the lever-action shotgun and the mare's rifle, but I hadn't had time to search the remains. I had only the ammo currently in the firearms. According to my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, that wasn't much: two shots in the shotgun, twelve in the rifle.

Red marks on my EFS compass told me that two more guards were ahead of me. They undoubtedly had the building surrounded outside. My only hope was to get out of here and change terrain before there was enough time for more than the closest slavers' forces to be brought to bear.

I wished I'd chosen to bring the StealthBuck after all.

The red marks moved, weaving through the maze, drawing closer. I crouched down, hiding, shotgun ready. The moment the first guard's head appeared in the corridor, I slid into S.A.T.S. and opened fire. The slaver guard went down hard, bleeding from a hole torn in her throat. The second was right behind her. I put the only other shot I had into her face, centered on her left eye. Then I discarded the lever-action shotgun and galloped ahead.

I heard shouts and the galloping sounds of armor-shod hooves on shattered glass behind me.

Ahead, I spotted an open doorway, twilight pouring in around the slaver pony positioned there. She was a unicorn, and was floating a riot shield in front of her as she finished setting up a chain gun in the entrance. Fuck!

I dove into another passage and backed towards a dead end as I weighed my options. The slavers behind me were getting closer.

I bumped into the mirror behind me, a splash of cold washing over my body from the touch. I turned, looking into the only fully intact mirror in the House of Wacky Reflections and froze.

Staring back at me was me… but not me. The Littlepip staring back at me was wearing cobbled-together raider armor. She was shot to hell, dying, her body giving out as she glared at me in a swiftly deteriorating battle stance, her gaze daring me to make another move.

I shrank back in horror, turned, and ran.

Right into the path of the chain gun.

I would have been bloody giblets if my sudden appearance hadn't completely surprised the unicorn mare. The moment it took her to recover was just enough for me to telekinetically grab the gun and spin it around, opening fire. The riot shield was sorely insufficient to its rather awesome firepower.

I paused a moment in a futile attempt to pull the chaingun off its mounting and take it with me. Then dashed out the door.

A sniper in one of the Pinkie Pie Balloons took a shot. The bullet whizzed past me, tearing into a ruined popcorn cart. I started weaving, making myself as difficult a target as possible. I needed someplace safe, preferably someplace high. It was time to call Calamity. This whole plan was a bust.

A griffin swooped overhead, strafing at me with a submachine gun. I changed course, hoping I wasn't being corralled.

I was. The path in front of me dead-ended at the wrought iron fence that surrounded the amusement park. They had maneuvered me into a trap.

At least, that was their intention. As I galloped past an overturned confectionary stand ("Pinkie Pie's Pink Pies!") I magically scooped up a dozen scattered pie tins, floating them ahead of me. I levitated them each higher than the last, forming stepping stairs. Wrapping myself with a levitation field to virtually negate my own weight, I ran up the stairway of pie tins and leapt over the fence.

The Pinkie Pie Balloon sniper fired again, putting a hole through the last tin just as my hoof left it. The griffin turned and continued the chase. But at least for the moment, I had reduced my opponents to two.

I dove, rolling, and brought up my targeting spell, unleashing half the bullets from the rifle into the griffin's armored underbelly as she flew over me. Talon armor turned out to be very good. She was not dead, not even bloodied, but the impacts knocked the wind from her, driving her to land roughly.

I rolled back to my hooves as another sniper shot struck the ground right where my head had been. I needed to get out from under this sniper pony! She was no Calamity, but she was a frighteningly good shot. And it would only take one hit.

I ran for the nearest intact building, firing the last of my bullets into the two guard ponies standing watch in front of it. I tossed the rifle, telekinetically swooping up one of the guards' automatic pistols as a replacement, and burst through the front doors of the Alpha-Omega Hotel.

⁂

The hotel which had once hosted the Summer Sun Celebration had seen better centuries. The aura of ruined opulence clung to the interior like its faded and peeling wallpaper. The air was dingy and filled with little motes of dust and decay. Small rains of plaster occasionally fell from the cracks in the ceiling.

The hotel was home to ponies who knew they were on a glorified death row.

Ponies sat along the bar, drinking their night away, knowing that tomorrow most of them would be slaughtered in bloody spectacle for the amusement of the crowds. Crowds full of fellow slaves who could somehow look into The Pit and not see themselves. Who could look… and actually cheer.

My heart felt sick as I walked quickly through the small throng of silent slave ponies. They glanced my way briefly, if at all. They didn't care. Why should they? We were, apparently, incapable of caring about each other.

I brushed dampness from my eyes and looked for the stairs. If I could make it to the roof, I could call Calamity and get the hell out of here.

I made my way up the Alpha-Omega, hooves plodding on rotting carpet. My EFS was picking up a host of friendly marks, but no sign of anypony (or griffin) who was hostile. I passed a painting of Celestia standing gracefully in what looked like a grand ballroom, a kind smile on her face, surrounded by colorful ponies in the fever of a party. The Summer Sun Celebration in full swing.

The painting was graying from age and dust.

"Goddesses, this is a depressing place," I muttered, almost wishing for more guards to come charging up behind me, if only so the adrenaline would shield me from the blanket of despair that was beginning to smother me.

Why weren't they? I should have all of Stern's armies on my tail by now. It's not like that sniper didn't see where I went.

Maybe they considered me trapped? But even then, I can't imagine they would just sit back and let me make a home in here. Why weren't they coming in?

I found the next flight of stairs and started up.

I was just clearing the top when all the friendly lights on my EFS started turning red. I was picking up dozens of hostiles now. Far too many; the lights burred together, making it impossible to identify the positions of individual opponents.

I floated up the automatic pistol and crouched low, hoping I could sneak past most of them.

The door opened, not by my horn or hoof, but by the telekinetic pull of a unicorn pony on the other side. I immediately slid into S.A.T.S., targeting the colt before he even saw me. And froze again.

A *colt!*

The child, who was floating a single-shot shotgun next to him inexpertly, wasn't even old enough to have a cutie mark.

Beyond him I saw other children, young fillies and colts all looking well-nourished, well cared for… and annoyingly well-armed. The room itself was brightly lit and recently painted in cheery colors. The worst of the cracks had been repaired (I suspected by magic), and the air was considerably cleaner. Unlike every other building used by either slavers or slaves, this floor had been restored to a fair reflection of its former glory. My eyes widened further as I spotted what was clearly a school room through the doorway opposite this one.

Red Eye's words echoed through my head:

Our nation's young ones are, and have always been, my highest priority. All that we sacrifice, we do for them, to give them a better place.

The scene before my eyes was simultaneously wonderful and horrifying.

Young children, ripped from the homes of their families and given to the care of "loving, approved mares and stallions." Their real families were dying in the city below, trapped and enslaved behind The Wall. While they themselves were being given the best possible care… probably the best possible *life* in the Equestrian Wasteland.

And they were being taught. Education. Indoctrination. Of course they loved him. They would be ready to kill for him.

Red Eye was building schools. And he was about to have the ability to print his own textbooks.

This scene was going to be repeated *everywhere.*

I couldn't do it. I killed S.A.T.S.

I couldn't sneak past all of them. And I couldn't, just couldn't, fight them.

"Hey!" the colt called down the stairs. "She's up here!"

I turned to flee, only to see a midnight blue alicorn moving silently up the stairs towards me.

I would have facehoofed if I had been given the chance. I had actually wondered why no one was coming in after me. By the Goddesses, how could I have forgotten some of these monsters can turn invisible?

The alicorn's horn was glowing. A metal apple floated towards me, the pin pulled. The alicorn would survive, but even if I did, the colt next to me would not. If there was time, I might have stopped to wonder why the alicorn would threaten a child if they were so clearly precious to Red Eye. But there was no time. Instinctively, I lashed out with my magic, trying to knock the grenade away.

I realized my mistake as the world started to slip away from me. The last thing I saw in this world was the alicorn drop the illusion that surrounded the memory orb.

They remembered. They learned. And I had been bested by my own trick.

* * *

Everything shot into almost brutal sharpness. Colors were more colorful. The lines around objects almost vibrant. The sunlight was sunnier than I had ever imagined it could be. Bright and warm and glorious beyond belief. I could smell the bush I was standing behind, the flowers nearby, the grass. I could smell the two ponies I was watching. The sweat on Applejack would have made me stir in recently wounded places if this had been my own body.

It was not, however – a fact to which I was hyper-aware. I could feel a slight burning on my left forehoof, as if I'd recently touched a hot stove. I had an itch on my cheek, an odd pain in my hindlegs that was barely noticeable, a tingle along my back. There was a familiar and delicious peppermint taste on my tongue.

Oh no…

With dawning horror, I realized that my pony host was high on Mint-als.

Oh please no! I can't take this!

The effects were nowhere near as pronounced. I was getting the heightened perceptions, but none of the other effects. Still, it was too comfortable, too alluring.

"Howdy, Fluttershy," Applejack said, greeting her friend with a smile as the yellow pegaus landed gently on the grass as if worried about hurting it.

"Hello, Applejack," the pegasus said meekly.

"So, what brings ya about these parts?"

"Well…" The shy pegasus looked down, crossing one leg over the other. "I… um… that is…"

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Good gravy, girl. Spit it out, already. Is something wrong?"

The pegasus took a deep breath and then said in a rush, "Are you looking for a close marefriend? Because, if you are, we could… um… you know?" She paused, all too obviously having no clue what good marefriends did in the privacy of their own beds.

My host stifled a giggle as Applejack's eyes went wide. Then she scowled, trotting past the deeply blushing pegasus to slam her head repeatedly against a tree.

When she finished, she turned on Fluttershy. "All right. That's enough. What is it with all muh friends hittin' on me, pretendin' Ah'm a fillyfooler? Y'all know better. *And* y'all are straight." She took a step forward. Fluttershy eeped and took one back. "Fluttershy, Ah know you. So be straight with me."

The pun was probably not intended.

"Well…"

"Did Rainbow Dash put ya up to this?" Applejack demanded.

"oh!" Fluttershy squeaked but shook her head. "No."

Applejack looked dubious. "So yer sayin' ya just thought this up all by yer lonesome?"

Fluttershy shook her head.

"So Rainbow Dash did put ya up t' it!"

"No," she insisted softly. My host began to move, silently creeping out from behind the bush.

"But… somepony did?" Applejack sussed out. Her yellow friend nodded. "Who?"

My host had moved up behind Applejack so quickly and stealthily even I hadn't seen it happen. Still, it bewildered me how we could be standing this close and neither of the ponies seemed to notice us. Were we invisible? It certainly wouldn't be the first time I had found myself in a magically hidden being who was spying on the Ministry Mares. But I was clearly in an earth pony…

Applejack turned around only to find herself nose-to-nose with my host. Spooked, she jumped away so fast she toppled onto her back. "Pinkie Pie!"

"Hiya!" I felt my muzzle say, hearing the words in a high-pitched but pretty voice. "Aww! Ya caught me!"

"What in tarnation are…" The blonde-maned orange pony stopped. Then facehoofed while still lying on her back in a most undignified position. "You! This has all been one of yer and Rainbow's practical jokes, ain't it?"

"Yep!" I heard myself say happily as I began to bounce. *Bounce!?*

Applejack pulled herself back onto her hooves, staring at me and my host crossly. "Care if Ah ask why?"

"Well, you've been totally a mopey-pony since the funeral…"

"Of course Ah have!" Applejack shot. "Ah buried muh brother!"

"…and you've been working really, really hard," Pinkie Pie plowed on. "An' ya haven't been getting out, or going to parties, or seeing your friends. And you haven't even talked to a buck in, like, for-ev-er!…"

Applejack huffed. "How would ya know if Ah've…" She stopped abruptly, realizing just how stupid a question that was considering who she was asking. Fluttershy had slipped back a ways, almost hiding.

"…and you're all worked up and stressed and you're gonna burn yourself out if you aren't careful, and you really, really need to get *laid!"*

Applejack hung her head. Pinkie Pie was… incorrigible at best. "This ain't gonna end until Ah get myself a buckfriend, is it?"

"Nope!" Pinkie Pie announced bouncily. How the hell could she bounce on all hooves like that? I was *inside* her, and I still couldn't figure it out.

"Well, would it help if Ah said there is a buck Ah've had muh eye on?"

Pinkie Pie stopped bouncing and stared off into space. The itch on the side of her cheek migrated to her chin. She looked back to Applejack, "Yep, that's the truth. But itchy chin means you haven't *told* him yet. You gotta talk to him!"

Applejack sighed. "An' if Ah do, this nonsense stops?" I watched the world rock as Pinkie Pie nodded enthusiastically.

My host started chanting "Do it!" rambunctiously as she bounced in circles around Applejack.

"Fine." Applejack reached out a hoof and stopped Pinkie Pie. "On one condition!"

"What?"

"Y'all got ta swear…" Applejack turned to look at Fluttershy. "…Both o' ya, that Rainbow Dash don't hear a word o' this!"

"But…" Pinkie Pie started, "If Rainbow Dash doesn't know, how will she know that it's time t' stop the prank, silly?"

"Ah can deal with it from Rainbow," Applejack said sternly. "Least, now that Ah know where it’s comin’ from. But this possible buckfriend o’ mine?… well, he’s got a kinda funny name… an’ Ah think Rainbow might not be able t’ keep herself from messin’ things up.”

Wow, that came out badly. Applejack seemed to realize it too. “Look, Ah’ll tell her muhself when Ah’m ready. Not b’fore.” She looked at her two friends. “Now y’all Pinkie Pie Swear it!”

Pinkie Pie Swear?

My host’s reaction was immediate. I struggled to keep track of the odd motions (which ended with sticking a hoof in my eye!) that accompanied the little singsong that Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy managed to do in perfect synchronicity.

“Cross my heart and hope to fly. Stick a cupcake in my eye!”

Applejack breathed a sigh of relief. The three friends began to walk, my host falling slowly behind.

“Oh… there it is again.”

Applejack and Fluttershy both stopped, looking back. “There what is?”

“Burning hoof means Littlepip’s watching me,” Pinkie Pie blurted out impossibly. “Or will be watching me. I’m not sure yet.” She bounced after her friends. “Who’s Littlepip?”

* * *

“The furnace pits?” Stern suggested, glaring at me. I was bound and shackled to the floor. And, as if that was not enough, two green-coated alicorns stood frozen beside me, trapping me inside a shield.

Not only had I done most of the things that Stern considered a death sentence, I had done them with aggressive results. I had still failed, but she took the time to name each slaver I managed to kill before my inevitable capture.

“No,” said Red Eye, eliciting a look of shock and displeasure from the griffin. The cybernetically-augmented stallion walked up to face me. “I’m feeling particularly generous today.”

I doubted I would much care for his definition of generosity. But the horrific tale of a pony being devoured from inside by an ever-growing number of parasprites left me thankful all the same.

Addressing me directly, Red Eye asked, “Do you think I’m a monster?”

Bluntly, I answered, “Yes.”

He shrugged. “Because, of course, I am. And you, Stable Dweller, can probably see it more clearly than most. Because you and I are a lot alike, are we not.”

“Not even slightly,” I hissed, lying through my teeth.

Red Eye chuckled. “I’ve heard of your exploits. I think we are more the same than you would like. You’ve just had it easy so far.”

Enraged, I spat, “Easy!? You think what I’ve been through out here has been *easy!?”*

Red Eye gave me an almost fatherly smile. “The fact that you can still stand there and judge me tells me so. You have had hardships I am sure. But you’ve never been forced to give up your principles for the greater good. To sacrifice yourself and become a monster because it was the right thing to do."

Oh how I disagreed!

"You couldn't do it even to escape," he noted. "For which, by the way, I am very grateful. Had you harmed a hair on even one of those children…" He paused, then simply said, "Thank you."

Red Eye turned towards Stern. His cape fell into view, a rough rectangle made from Stable security barding. The number 101 was visible in yellow against the black cloth.

"Take her back downstairs and keep her under shield. Tomorrow, she fights in The Pit."

⁂

Lined up in the darkness with five other ponies, I spent an hour rummaging through the recorded messages of Miss Periwinkle. Most were worthless, but one was actually from a Ministry Mare… and not the one I had been expecting.

> *"Dear Miss Periwinkle,"* the voice began. I found it very odd to hear an audio message addressed like it was a letter.
>
> *"It was a pleasure to hear from you again. The new posters for the libraries are absolutely perfect. I hope it will not be a burden to have two hundred produced by next week?*
>
> *"I also have a… more delicate matter to ask you about.*
>
> *"Let me preface this by saying that for decades now, ever since she taught me her gem-finding spell, Rarity and I have gotten together at irregular intervals to swap magical spells.*
>
> *"I must admit, and please believe I do not say this to brag, it has been a long time since she brought anything that I hadn't already learned myself. That is, until three days ago.*
>
> *"I was thrilled to see that she had learned a trick I had never seen before. She had enchanted a small mirror. To look in it, you would see your reflection, just as with any mirror. But if you touched it, or focused your magic on it, then a spell within the mirror took… well, the way she put it, the mirror took a picture of your soul. Then a second enchantment allowed the mirror to show that image. As Rarity told me, the mirror could show you what you looked like on the outside… or on the inside.*
>
> *"I must admit… I wasn't ready for what I saw. And I'm still not sure about it. But that's… personal. Rather, I wanted to ask you if you could give me any clue as to where Rarity may have learned enchantments like that. I know Rarity would refashion any magical spell until it was customized to her wishes; but honestly, I've been scouring my books, but I've found nothing that even remotely resembles these spells. I know you have worked closely with her the last few months, so I hoped you would have an idea.*
>
> *"Also, it's hardly worth mentioning, but the spell felt… cold. Not like Rarity's spells at all.*
>
> *"Anyway, this is mostly just a matter of rampant curiosity, and I ask that you*

please not mention this to her. But if you have any idea, I really would appreciate it if you let me know.

"Your friend,

"Twilight Sparkle."

I deleted the messages from my PipBuck, but kept that one.

I sat in silent darkness with five other marked souls and waited.

* * *

The noise outside told me that the seating around the arena was quickly filling. I heard Stern, her voice magnified over the speakers, welcoming everypony to the bloody show. I heard hooves pounding bleachers in applause.

My face twisted in disgust. How could they? This was sick.

Earlier, a slave master pony had attached a sheet to my flank, covering my cutie mark. She had snarled and whispered to me her fondest desires that my suffering be deep and excruciating and very slow. She had known one of the rapist slavers. The only reason I survived being numbered was because Stern was watching, but she still got away with covering the bottom side of the sheet with some sort of stinging powder that was making it hard for me to concentrate.

I was number three.

Blood and Daff were numbers one and two, respectively. They sat closest to the gate, looking out at the arena – a large plot of broken cement underneath a cage from which several barrels were suspended. I could see pressure plates set up like mines all over. Neither of them had spoken to me, going out of their way to ignore my existence. I couldn't decide whether to be hurt or relieved.

"Used to be an ice skating rink," the blue-colored buck with number four on his flank said conversationally. "Apparently, the owner of the FunFarm had a thing for ice skating. Just be thankful that Red Eye removed the water talisman and put it to better use. These fights are brutal enough without having to do them on ice."

I tried to imagine that and just couldn't. Outside the crowds began to chant for the first fight, their hoofstomps falling into a unity that would make the Goddess proud. Part of me wanted to hurt them. And these were the ponies I was trying to save.

"Hey, consider yourself lucky," the blue buck joked. "Being number three ain't bad. Has anypony told you how these things work?"

I shook my head. The roar outside rose to a crescendo. There was a loud buzz, then a clanging sound as the gate was levitated up by a unicorn nopony inside could see.

"Round one!" Stern's voice boomed.

"From the Red Gate: all the way from the Rock Farms, we have Cinderblock! This is his second Event, so you know he's got some hooves on him! And from the Black Gate: she's tough, she's mean, she's a raider with a body count higher than the spikes in her hair… it's Blood!"

Blood got up, looking dejectedly at the open gate for a moment, then held her head up and trotted out, putting on a brave face that I didn't believe even a little bit.

"You see," Number Four was telling me, "There are two gates. We're Black Gate. Each gate has six fighters, randomly numbered. If you survive your first round, you will be pitted against the next opponent from the Red Gate. Event lasts until all the opponents from one gate are dead. The survivors from the other gate live fight in the next Event."

I looked at Blood and winced. "So, basically, it sucks to be number one." I couldn't believe I was feeling sympathy for the vile raider mare.

"Well, it's a give and take," Number Four said. I looked at him quizzically. "I mean, true, if you're a high enough number, it's possible you won't have to fight at all. And anypony who survives six Events is set free. Doesn't matter if he actually *fought* or not." I got the feeling that Number Four had made it through at least one Event just that way.

"You even get a spot in Red Eye's army!" he added enthusiastically. I considered pointing out to him the sort of position Red Eye would likely appoint him to if he never won a fight. But I kept my muzzle shut.

The sudden roar of the crowd snapped my attention back to the arena. Blood was down, soaking in a pool of her own… well, blood. Cinderblock, an athletic-looking light grey buck, was rearing his hooves in victory. The fight had lasted seconds.

My heart sank.

"What was the benefit of being first again?" I asked dully.

Number Four leaned close, apparently unable to comprehend personal space. "Well, you see those barrels? And you see those plates?" I nodded to each. "Step on a plate, the barrel above drops. Now the barrels are full of nasty stuff. Usually radioactive goo, but sometimes its something worse. I heard they once had one filled with tainted ooze."

I shuddered, looking up at the cage that had been constructed over the arena and the barrels hanging from it. A few griffins flew high above, watching the show with binoculars or through rifle scopes. My eyes caught a swinging door built into the cage, kept closed by a simple padlock.

"Round Two!" Stern cried out.

"From the Black Gate, we have Daffodil!" The crowd broke into snickers and chortles as Daff got up and stepped out into the arena. He took one look at the bloody corpse of his companion and then locked Cinderblock with a hard stare that I could almost feel from behind him.

Daffodil charged at the light grey pony. Cinderblock ran… not towards him, but towards one of the pressure plates. The barrel above didn't exactly drop. Rather, as the grey pony raced across the plate, the underside of the barrel swung open and a dozen mines rained down, hitting the ground and bouncing in all directions. Daff changed direction with a deftness I would not have expected.

The mines were rigged for fast detonation, only beeping once before exploding in a flash of smoke and shrapnel. Cinderblock had almost been fast enough, but his hind legs were peppered and torn as he was flung forward. He was still struggling to get back on his bleeding legs when Daff reached him.

I knew how hard those hooves hit. But seeing this, I suspected that Daff had held back when he bucked the living fuck out of me. Even with his last, low blow.

The crowd beat their hooves and cried out for more as Daff pummeled the other buck, breaking first his legs, then every other bone he could before killing him.

I tasted bile.

"Mines," Number Four mused. "Well, that was a new one." I shot him a dark look. "Hey, like I was saying, those barrels have nasty things. But they also always have a weapon or two in them. So if you're first, you get your pick of the prizes. And if you go last, well… you go up against an opponent with their choice of weapons, in an arena filled with ooze and Goddess knows what else, and all you have are your hooves. Fighting last sucks."

"Round Three!" Stern finally announced after Daff had stopped brutalizing Cinderblock and started just beating a dead pony.

"From the Black Gate, we still have Daffodil, after a surprising and entertaining first performance. I don't think any of you ponies are snickering at his name *now,* are you?"

The crowd applauded the crimson-splattered buck whose angry-flower cutie mark was now partially visible behind his number two patch, which was sagging and wet with Cinderblock's lifeblood.

"And now, the one I know you've all been waiting for!"

The crowd hushed with gleeful anticipation.

"From the Red Gate: she's demonic, she's exotic, and she has never lost a fight! Give it up for our Champion four-Events-running! Xenith!"

My first thought, struck in my brain at the word "exotic", was a pegasus mare. The idea of facing a flying opponent in this arena was terrifying. And, if she was as good as advertised, I would be facing her as soon as she finished killing Daff.

The Red Gate opened and Xenith stepped out into the arena to absolutely thunderous, overwhelming applause. From her grim expression, she wasn't enjoying it one bit. From the look she gave Daff, she was going to kill him, she knew it and it brought her no pleasure at all.

From her lack of wings, she wasn't a pegasus. From her stripes, she wasn't even a pony.

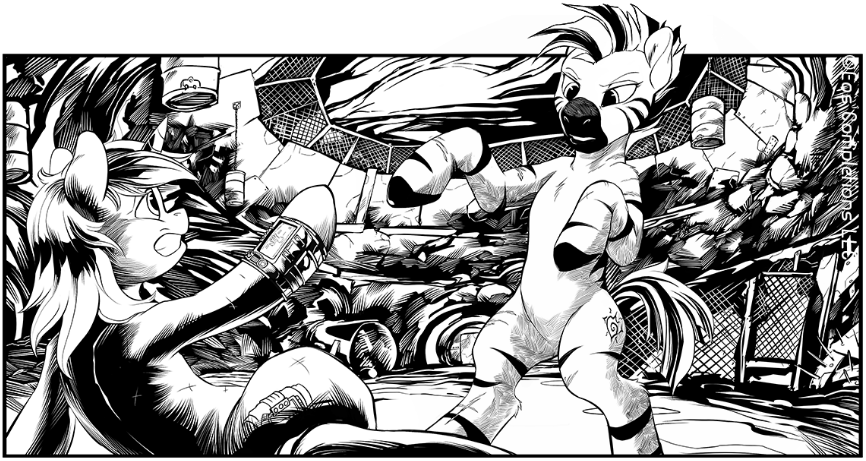
"She's a zebra!"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Cooler Under Fire – You regenerate Action Points faster. How much faster? You guessed it: 20% faster!

Chapter Twenty-Six

Xenith



"The fate of Equestria does not rest on me making friends."

Zebras.

Equestria's enemies. The creatures who slaughtered us by the millions and destroyed our lands with poisoned clouds and balefire bombs.

The creatures which were constantly portrayed as demonic, nightmarish, virtually without souls. Creatures who, according to the propaganda of the Ministry of Image, embodied the antitheses of pony virtues.

"Yeah…" I thought, looking out into a caged arena where ponies murdered each other brutally for the sport of slaves. "…because we ponies are so noble."

Was it fair to paint Xenith with all the wrongdoings of the members of her race centuries dead? No more so than to blame me for the things ponies must have done to them.

I had my own sins to bear the guilt for.

And now, assuming a raider buck named Daffodil didn't strike her down, I was expected to fight this zebra. And either kill her, or die by her hooves. Most likely the latter. I had been stripped of everything that I could use as a weapon. Even the screwdriver I had fought so hard for and felt I had earned had been taken. I had my horn, my hooves, my single spell, and S.A.T.S. My brawling skills were, to put it bluntly, pathetic. It would be a miracle if I survived.

I had managed miracles before. That was Red Eye's intention: that either I should die, or that I should be forced to kill other slaves, this zebra being only one of many, compromising the parts of me I held sacred just so that I might live long enough to kill him.

Either way would be a victory for him. Although the latter, if I did manage to kill him, would be a pyrrhic victory at best.

I thought of the image in the mirror. Littlepip as a raider, soaked in blood, dying. That was *not* my soul, of that I was certain! But… I knew that I could become that. I was already swimming in the slaughter of my enemies.

I realized that I was Monterey Jack, forced between destroying what allowed me to live with myself, or just dying.

I needed another option.

* * *

The heat of the sun pushed down through black clouds, baking the red-tinged hellscape of Fillydelphia. Daffodil stood firm, snorting heavily, the mangled corpse of Cinderblock oozing blood that soaked into the ground around Daff's hooves.

The body of Blood, Daff's raider companion, lay not far away, her own blood drying and caking.

Daff looked at her, and I could see hurt on his face. I realized that she was just going to lay there, baking in the heat, until all the fights were over. I wanted to scream. He wasn't even given time to mourn. The next fight had already begun.

Daff turned, locking his gaze on the zebra named Xenith. An extremely rare sight in the Equestrian Wasteland. Possibly even more so than a pegasus.

"Xenith's been in the slave pits for years," commented the blue-coated pony assigned to fight after I did. "We worked near each other in the alchemy huts up on the northside for about three months, mostly recycling flamethrower fuel. All that time, she never said a word. Way I heard it, the slavers who captured her cut out her tongue after she said something offensive to them."

Number Four paused, "Her being a zebra and all, it was probably something downright egregious. Like 'Hello'."

I watched as the zebra stepped forward, moving up to Daff and lowering her head in what struck me as a sign of respect for her mortal opponent.

Daff didn't see it that way. He saw an opportunity, and he took it. Spinning around, he delivered a brutal buck right into her neck. The zebra fell sprawling.

Daff turned, rearing up, lifting both hooves over the fallen zebra. Xenith rolled onto her back and kicked out with her hindhooves, planting them ferociously into the rearing earth pony's exposed stomach. Daff fell, clutching his belly, coughing bloody spittle.

The zebra somersaulted onto her hooves.

Daff grunted and pushed himself back up, only for the zebra to crouch and spin on one forehoof, her outstretched hindlegs sweeping Daff's legs out from under him. He went down again.

I stared, my jaw falling nearly to the ground. I watched the zebra's fluid motions. She wasn't brawling – this was more of a fighting art form. I'd never seen anything like it.

"Heh. Looks like Fallen Caesar Style… not that I'm an expert," Number Four noted with casual awe. His eyebrows shot up at my blank look. "Don't tell me you've entered The Pit without having read at least a few *Martial Arts of the Zebra* books? How do you expect to win?"

"N-no," I stammered. Of all the books I'd stumbled across in my wasteland trek, I'd somehow managed to miss that one. "Of c-course not!" I turned back to the fight.

Daff had gotten back on his hooves and was circling the zebra. The zebra watched him, waiting for his attack with an almost eerie calm. He lunged, and she tossed herself down, planting a hoof into his breast and using his own momentum to fling him over her. Daff hit the dirt, sprawling.

She was a far better fighter. This was unfair.

But Daff was stronger. And he fought dirtier.

Xenith trotted cautiously closer. I suspected she was looking to end the fight while the piss-colored buck was still face-down in the dirt. Daff was trembling as if in exhaustion, and he moaned as he tried to push himself up only to have his legs go out from under him.

His weakness was a ruse. The moment Xenith got close enough, Daff twisted about on the ground and kicked a cloud of dirt and grit into her eyes. She whinnied, backing up, blinded. Her body sunk into a defensive position, prepared for immediate attack.

But Daff had seen something she apparently had not. And instead of turning to fight her, he dashed forward. I heard the BEEP of the undetonated mine as he galloped over it, kicking the explosive back towards the zebra with a hindhoof.

Xenith had heard it too. She flung herself away as best she could, the mine exploding in the air with almost two pony-lengths between itself and the zebra. Not lethal or even crippling, but enough to send her tumbling, the wind knocked out of her.

I felt myself gasp.

“Oh, she can handle a lot more than that,” Number Four commented. “The slavers regularly did a number on her back in the huts. Seemed to take great delight in taking everything out on her. Made it a lot easier on the rest of us.”

I bristled, wincing both at the mental images his words conjured and at the stinging in my flank. The powder that the slaver had trapped against my cutie mark was sinking its nasty teeth into my flesh.

“Hell, I remember one time a unicorn slave messed up with the recycling and set herself on fire. The slavers shot her so she didn’t run around setting the whole place ablaze. Then, after the flames had gone out, just for fun, they chopped off the unicorn’s head and raped the zebra with it.” Number Four at least had the decency to cringe a little. I was staring in utter horror. “Come to think of it, that was just before she volunteered for The Pit.”

Xenith was pulling herself up. Daff had used the moment of reprieve not to attack but to run across another of the pressure plates. The latch on the barrel above clicked free and the bottom opened, releasing gallons of glowing green slosh. (“Yep, now that’s what most of them have,” Number Four commented.) Something large fell out in the goop, hitting the ground with a wet thud. Daff was out of the way of all but a few splashing drops, but those pulled a scream out of him. He danced, shaking the glowing crap off, then turned to see his prize.

An auto-axe lay in the spreading, luminescent green puddle, glistening wetly. Daff grimaced. Having just felt a few drops on his flanks, he didn’t seem inclined to put something bathed in that goop into his mouth.

Xenith was moving cautiously forward again. She’d gleaned enough of his tactics to know she didn’t wish to engage Daff anywhere near that glowing puddle. They began to circle the spill opposite of each other, each keeping their distance from the slosh, Xenith even more than Daff.

The ponies in the bleachers began to stomp in unison. "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Daff made a move. He had managed to circle around so he was within range of Cinderblock's corpse, with Xenith on the other side of the pool. Dashing over Cinderblock's remains, he drew up his hindhooves…

BUCK! Cinderblock's corpse flew behind him.

Sploosh! A wave of the green sludge surged towards Xenith. The zebra pinwheeled to the side in a maneuver I didn't even think possible.

She charged towards Daff.

The large buck saw her coming and crouched down, holding his ground. He drove both hindhooves towards her in a powerful strike the moment she got within hoof's reach.

But Xenith jumped. She leapt clean over Daffodil, striking the nape of his neck with a passing hoof. She landed in a graceful roll that ended with her back on her hooves, facing him.

Daff seemed frozen in place. He stared, unmoving.

"Paralyzing Hoof!" Number Four announced. "Now that's *definitely* Fallen Caesar Style."

She could paralyze a pony with a hoofstrike? How the hell was I supposed to fight against that?

Daff toppled over. Xenith trotted up to the fallen pony, her sad gaze looking into his wide and fearful eyes. The crowd began to chant and pound their hoofs. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Stern's voice called out, bizarrely magnified. "Finish it!"

The zebra planted one hoof on Daff's neck. She lowered her head, her muzzle lingering next to his ear a moment before she bit into his mane. She pulled her head back with a hard jerk. I heard Daff's neck crack.

Xenith's teeth let go of the dead pony's mane. She trotted towards the center of the arena and waited for her next opponent. Me.

* * *

The midday heat was becoming stifling under the thick, choking blanket of the Fillydelphia cloud cover. My cracked rib ached. My flank was stinging so badly I had to wipe tears from my eyes.

Xenith stood, watching me with those sad eyes, as I plodded into the arena.

Now that I was inside, rather than watching through a gate, I could see more of The Pit. But it was mostly just more of the same. There was a third entrance – a set of double doors behind which I imagined slaver guards were waiting ready to gallop into what had once been an ice-skating rink at the first sign of real trouble. I could see Stern standing on a raised and barricaded platform above and behind the bleachers. She was wearing an odd pre-war headset that I suspected was responsible for amplifying her voice. She was also wearing her anti-machine rifle, slung back over her Talon armor.

And I could see the mob of ponies staring down into the arena with gleeful anticipation. I noticed a few were eating snacks. I felt a flare of anger. A pony wouldn't want to see me brutally murdered on an empty stomach after all.

"I'm trying to save all of you WHY?" I screamed out at them. For just a moment, I could understand how Red Eye morally justified putting these ponies through such suffering to build a better world. I didn't agree, but I could comprehend it.

You see, little pony? Mister Topaz had said. *Look at what you ponies are doing to each other up there. Look at what you did to each other in here. What makes you think your pathetic, wicked species is worth being anything other than dragon food?"*

I tried to remember my answer.

Xenith stepped closer to me. I could see that her body bore many scars under her striped coat. Her cutie mark (or whatever zebra's have on their flanks in place of one) was a squiggly jumble of lines, looking more like a complex glyph than a proper cutie mark icon. On her right flank, it looked like somepony had snuffed out cigars against it.

She lowered her head as she neared me. That same posture which I had taken before as a show of respect.

Then, very softly, so that only I could hear, Xenith whispered, "I'm sorry."

I froze, stunned. The zebra who hadn't even spoken out when slave-masters were raping her with a dead pony's horn broke her silence for me. A sign of respect indeed.

Of course, I realized, she had played the mute because doing anything else would have resulted in actually losing her tongue. She could break it to me because I was about to die.

I also realized, a moment too late, that her words had effectively dropped my guard.

Xenith struck me with her forehooves, driving them into my wounded side. I heard and felt as my cracked rib broke and punctured into one of my lungs. I collapsed, sliding backwards from the force of the blow. The world swam as I struggled for air.

It was like she'd known just where to strike to cause the most injury. (As opposed to Daff, who had just known where to cause the most pain.)

I looked into the sky, a red fog seeping into the edges of my vision. I saw the griffins flying above, their talons holding rifles. I could hear the pounding of over two hundred hooves as the ponies in the bleachers called for my death.

A shadow fell over me. I turned to see Xenith rearing up, her hooves raising above my face for a swift final blow.

I gasped, my horn flaring, and kicked against the ground. My levitation blanket wrapped around me, making me nearly weightless, and I surged up off the ground like a kicked balloon. The zebra's hooves slammed into dirt that still bore the imprint of my head.

"Wait!" I gasped again, feeling the strain of levitating myself while I was struggling for proper breath. "We… we don't have to do this…"

The zebra looked up to me with an expression of resignation and pity.

"Please… don't do what they want you to do!" I was sinking back towards the ground slowly. Xenith watched, waiting for me to come back within reach. "Join me. We can escape together."

Xenith snorted, giving me a look that made me wonder just how many ponies had made this offer before. But none, I suspected, who could actually succeed.

"FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT!" cried the crowd.

"I have a plan…" I offered, trying to sound more confident than I was. My success rate with plans in the last few days had not been self-inspiring. This entire plot had been amazingly ill-conceived.

In truth, I had been arrogant – so prideful of my ability to improvise, so full of myself from past victories, that I actually thought I could walk into the enemy camp with nothing but my wits… and win. I let the Elder convince me this was the only way because it conveniently allowed me to protect my friends. Instead, I had become a slave, and now I was desperately attempting to float beyond the reach of a zebra's devastating hoofstrikes.

It was time to get out, regroup and hopefully come up with a strategy less mind-bogglingly stupid.

Xenith jumped, a forehoof striking me in the breast. Pain exploded through my body! I screamed, my magic imploding as I dropped to the ground with a thud.

The zebra landed a pony's length away.

Gasping wretchedly for air, I looked up as she took a step backwards, bringing her hindhooves into bucking range.

My horn glowed again. In desperation, I wrapped the telekinetic field around her throat and began to tighten.

As I began to choke her, Xenith bucked at my unbroken ribs. But my choking had thrown off her aim just enough, and I had learned to dodge.

The zebra staggered as I tightened my telekinetic grip. There wasn't much physical force behind my telekinesis, but I had enough to crush her throat. I didn't want to kill the zebra mare, but I had to take her out of the fight.

Xenith wobbled, eyes buldging, nostrils flaring. For a moment, she gave me the same terrified look that Daff had given her. Then that look melted into resignation and she stopped struggling, watching me with a gaze that told me she had accepted my victory.

Then she passed out. I released her, letting her drop like a sack of apples.

"What an upset!" Stern's voice boomed.

All around me, the air roared with thunderous applause.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

I struggled upright, painfully catching my breath, and looked up at the crowd. I hated them. Every one of them.

I trotted over to Xenith's fallen form. She was breathing slowly.

I looked up at the barrels. My horn flared again, wrapping one of them in a magical field. But the barrel was securely fastened to the cage ceiling, and my telekinesis was not strong enough to tear it free.

Stern seemed to glean that I was up to something because she unslung her anti-machine rifle. "Finish it!" the griffin demanded. Couldn't Stern at least call Xenith *'her'?*

My mind flashed to the memory of how the barrels opened. I didn't need to pull them down, just flip the latches. Latches were easy.

My horn glowed brightly.

Stern pulled her anti-machine rifle forward and peered at me through its scope. "Finish it now!"

The latches on the barrels sprung open. All of them.

My PipBuck clickclick*clicked* urgently. True to Number Four's predictions, most of the barrels held glowing green sludge. And weapons. The barrel's released their contents, raining down implements of death. A magical-energy lance, a sword, a chainsaw (a *chainsaw!?*) and even a couple firearms. I let them fall where the barrels dropped them. It was the sludge I wanted.

The luminescent goop was barely translucent. I spun it around and over the inside of the cage, creating a glowing green curtain, thin as film but enough to obscure me inside. I didn't want any of those griffins or guard slavers to be able to take shots at me. Immediately, I galloped into a new position; as I predicted, Stern fired a shot at where I had just been standing.

I felt tears in my eyes. The pain in my chest was burning, my breathing becoming more ragged as I tried to maintain focus in so many places at once. Each breath felt a little like drowning.

I wrapped another telekinetic sheath around myself, canceling out my weight, then extended it to wrap about the zebra as well. There was never any question that I would be taking her with me. The thought of leaving her behind here had never entered my mind.

My vision blurred. I forced myself to keep focus. My horn flared brighter, a layer of overglow erupting from it. It occurred to me that a keen-eyed griffin might be able to spot the glow of my horn through the curtain of muck.

But I needed to keep enough focus and channel enough power for just one more trick. And I needed more time.

I telekinetically grabbed the magical energy lance and wedged it across the double-doors seconds before slavers started slamming against them, trying to get in.

The curtain weakened, holes appearing along the top of it. One of those tears was almost directly above me, revealing the door in top of the cage which I had spotted earlier, bound closed with a simple padlock. I kicked off, sending myself floating upwards, my eyes fixed on the padlock. I had no bobby pins. My screwdriver had been stolen from me.

I should not need them.

Manipulating multiple objects that were out of sight was tricky, but I had pulled pins from grenades hidden in a sack. And I knew locks. I knew tumblers and internal mechanisms. I should be able to pick a lock with my magic alone.

Reaching out with my magic, I enveloped the padlock in a gentle glow. My own horn flared as a second layer of overglow burst around the first. Streams of light poured from my head.

I felt a bullet lash past me, followed by the sound of a gunshot. Below, the blows against the double doors were causing the magical energy lance to bend.

I was still floating upward, carrying the unconscious zebra. We were nearing the cage. But our ascent was slowing alarmingly. One of the griffins above fired down at me, but the shot sparked off one of the bars of the cage.

"I can *do* this!" I told myself repeatedly.

A second shot sparked against the gate itself, inches from the padlock.

Who was I fooling? I could barely breathe! My magic faltered, the swirling curtain slipping, wavering.

No! *"I* can *do this!"*

I shifted the tumblers into place. The padlock sprung open. My vision swam again. I nearly lost everything.

The magical energy lance cracked in two. The doors below swung open and slavers stumbled into the arena.

Frantically, I hovered the padlock away and pushed open the gate. A moment later, we were through and I was running along the top of the cage as fast as my surviving lung would allow me. I let everything fall except my grasp around myself and Xenith. My whole body screamed in pain and exertion.

Shots rang out, bullets striking the cage about me from above and below. I weaved erratically, again doing my best to make a hard target. I was reaching the edge of the cage.

The ice arena was at the far end of the Fillydelphia FunFarm. With luck, I could jump from it over the fence, again putting a barrier between me and at least the ground-bound slavers.

The end of the cage came faster than I would have wanted. I jumped, screaming from the agony in my chest. The two of us soared out over the amusement park. My heart sank as I realized I had run the wrong way and my jump was taking me into the FunFarm rather than away from it.

A tearing kick jerked my right foreleg with a metallic crunch! The sound of Stern's anti-machine rifle followed closely after as searing red agony shot through my leg. The bullet had missed, just barely catching my PipBuck, but the force of that alone felt like it had shattered my leg!

I fell, my magical field imploding, collapsing onto a set of tracks several stories above the amusement park below.

* * *

I moaned, feeling the world thump rhythmically though my body as if I was riding a washing machine, and not in the way young fillies do to enjoy themselves. The world seemed crazily tilted. I could only take shallow breaths. Bright pain pulsed in my right foreleg. I heard gunfire.

Memory flooded back to me and my eyes shot open. I looked around, almost falling off the back of the zebra who was carrying me up a steep slope on the Fillydelphia FunFarm's roller coaster track.

I had been out for a few minutes at most. Long enough for the zebra to come to. Having awoken on the elevated tracks, jumping hadn't been an option. There were only two ways for her to go. I felt thankful that Xenith had returned the favor and taken me with her.

My first worry was for my PipBuck. I lifted my foreleg, but only managed to raise it a few inches before I let out a tortured scream, hot pain bursting through my leg.

My PipBuck had taken an indirect hit; it was not itself damaged, but the bullet had torn through the peripheral. The broadcaster was destroyed. And with it, my plan for escape.

I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. My PipBuck was flashing alerts. I had taken more rads from being in the middle of all that green sludge than my PipBuck liked. My chest and right foreleg had taken crippling wounds, the latter having suffered a wrenching sprain and a small hairline fracture in the bone.

Looking down, I saw slaver ponies shooting at us from the ground. By experience these mares and bucks were not the best shots even at close range. If they hit us at this distance with the cover of the tracks, it would be by sheer dumb luck.

Behind us even more were charging up the track, but they were well behind. It was the griffins that were the biggest threat. I looked around, but couldn't spot them. Which meant little.

Xenith reached the apex of the track, stopping just shy of it. A set of three colorfully-painted, pony-shaped carriages sat on the top of the roller coaster's hill, rusting for two hundred years. There wasn't any room to go around them, leaving the zebra no apparent choice but to climb over them.

She cautiously put a hoof onto the orange rear carriage and pressed her weight down on it. The carriage gave a metallic groan. She looked back at me with a grimace that I was able to match.

I focused, wrapping us in a levitation field to reduce our weight. Perspiration broke across my head. Hot coals formed in my lungs, only one of which could catch breath. The effort sucked all the remaining strength out of me. My magical field popped as I nearly blacked out again.

No. Dammit, why did this have to be happening now? I'd overtaxed my magic once before, and it had taken days (and a magical statuette) before I could properly float objects again. This felt much the same. Perhaps not a true burnout, but a severe drop in power, the result of having pushed so hard in such a weakened state. And true burnout could be imminent.

I steadied my breath and focused again. My horn glowed softly. The levitation field wrapped slowly around us. I was breathing quickly, nearly hyperventilating, but the field was holding. "Climb," I gasped, "Now."

The zebra cautiously mounted the carriage, then stepped down onto the bench of the first seat well. The old car rocked slightly, groaning again. Step by step she started walking across the trio of carriages.

We were halfway across the purple middle carriage when a hole punched through the nose of the carriage in front, followed by a distant report. I grunted as Xenith took an involuntary step backward and fell partially into the carriage seat. My magic imploded and the linked carriages let out a protesting whine.

I had been wrong. It wasn't the griffins I had to worry about. It was the snipers in the damn Pinkie Pie Balloons. Once we crested the top, we had put ourselves right in their crosshairs. And the carriages slowed us to a crawl, giving them easy shots.

Another shot punched clean through the seat and carriage frame behind us. Xenith dumped me off her back into the cover of the seat well, then scrambled to take cover in the seat well ahead of us. We were pinned.

The shadow of a griffin shot over us, dropping something that hit the rim of the stairwell and bounced over the edge of the track. A moment later, the grenade went off, the sound of splintering wood accenting the explosion. I felt a subtle and unpleasant shift in the carriage beneath us; the grenade had taken out some of the beams in the already precarious roller coaster's framework.

Another griffin soared past, spreading his wings and banking. With alarm, I saw the creature was holding a rocket launcher!

There was no time to think. We had to go.

Jumping out of the seat well, I swung around and bucked the link that held the front two carriages to the back one. Another gunshot ripped the air above my left flank and punched into the back carriage. I noticed belatedly that the nose of each carriage was shaped and painted to look comically like the faces of Pinkie Pie's friends.

I flung my forehooves back into the seat well and bucked Applejack in the face. My body screamed in protest, my right foreleg flaring in pain and slipping.

The orange rear carriage squealed and began sliding backwards down the tracks, sparks spraying from rust-jammed wheels. The slaver ponies charging after us stopped abruptly, standing like pins before a bowling ball, then turned and tried to run the other way. One of them tried to leap onto a lower set of tracks and disappeared from sight.

Without the rearmost carriage as an anchor, the front two began to slowly slide down the forward slope. I swung myself, trying to hook my injured leg back around the seat well's edge. I succeeded, but the pain slammed into my head like a sledgehammer. I screamed, nearly slipping free entirely.

Xenith jumped back into my seat well, grabbing my mane in her teeth.

The rocket-launcher griffin fired. A streak of smoke shot towards us, tipped with violent death.

Xenith wrenched me into the carriage, pushing us both down as far as we could go. A moment later, the rocket struck into the track almost where the rear car had been. The explosion washed over the top of us, cutting our backs with shrapnel and kissing us with flame. The carriage lurched forward hard, bucking up from the track and slamming back down as bits of metal track and chunks of burning wood rained into the park below. What had been a slow crawl forward was abruptly transformed into a racing plummet.

The carriages bumped and rattled, squealing all the way down. The light blue carriage ahead bucked and skipped, threatening to jump the tracks. If it did, we were done for. There was no Calamity to catch me this time.

My stomach lurched violently as the downhill slide swept into an uphill thrust, tossing us against the seat well's bench.

The upward angle of the carriage now left our seat well exposed. A bullet punched into the bench, inches from Xenith's left shoulder, spraying rotted foam.

One of the griffins (I believe the one who had tossed the grenade) had unslung his lever-action rifle and was flying towards us, slowly pumping shots in our direction. Our impromptu ride had put distance between us and them, but we were already slowing. He would be in optimal firing range in moments.

The second griffin was reloading his rocket launcher. A third swept around behind him and banked, moving out of my line of sight beneath the wooden hills of the roller coaster.

Lever-action griffin fired again, and a line of blood spurted from the back of Xenith's neck. A grazing shot that I knew must burn. But she gritted her teeth and kept silent. The griffin moved closer, aiming, and fired again.

The rifle was empty. Cursing, the griffin drew up into a hover and began to reload.

Reloading meant he had less of a grip on his weapon. I focused and telekinetically wrenched the firearm away, closing it. The griffin's eyes widened as his own weapon twirled around to point at him. ***BLAM!***

As he fell, another stream of smoke leapt from the other griffin's missile launcher and raced towards us. The missile streaked past us, and I heard it detonate somewhere ahead.

I urgently floated the lever-action rifle, checking the shots. The griffin had only loaded two bullets into the rifle before I had snatched it away, leaving me with one shot. I had to choose my next sh-

The third griffin suddenly swooped up right next to our carriage as we crested the smaller hill, aiming a scattergun point blank at our faces.

BLAM! The griffin spiraled downward, my barely-aimed shot having gone through her wing.

Xenith was cringing in the seat well. I dared to sit up and look ahead. At the base of this hill, the track took a sharp curve and shot into the tunnel that passed through the barn-like Ministry of Morale building. But that second rocket had torn a hole in the track.

Xenith muttered something in a strange tongue, appearing at my side. Then, in a low voice, "I hope this is still going according to plan."

"Yes," I lied.

I crawled forward, cringing as a balloonist sniper sent another shot into the track ahead of us, the bullet from the anti-machine rifle obliterating a track tie. I hooked my flanks against the forward seat well and slid over the face of Twilight Sparkle. The small horn protruding from the front gave me something to brace a shoulder against. Reaching down with my left forehoof, I kicked at the latch, freeing the light blue forward car.

Freed of the extra weight, the forward car began to separate, slipping ahead. It hit the turn, then the gap… and the Rainbow Dash carriage did what it really wanted to do. It flew from the tracks and caught air.

Focusing for all I was worth, I enveloped the Twilight Sparkle car in a magical field, negating our weight. I prayed to Luna that it would be enough to let us jump the gap. I prayed to Celestia that my strength wouldn't give out until we had.

If there had been any doubt in my mind that the Goddesses were watching us from above, it evaporated as both prayers were answered.

* * *

The purple Twilight Sparkle carriage swept into the darkness of the tunnel. A hard jolt slammed through us as our out-of-control ride finally skipped the track. I felt my body being flung from the car as it skidded and flipped. I hit the track roughly; new pain bit deeply into my shoulder and arced like electricity along the nerves of my left foreleg as my left shoulder struck the metal rail.

Xenith remained huddled in the seat well as the carriage rolled once before crashing against a row of clown-pony-shaped pylons. I looked up, wheezing, to see the zebra's form crawl shakily out of the wreckage.

I struggled to my hooves. Both my forelegs protested with discordant pain. My head swam. I wondered if I was in shock.

Xenith trotted up to me. "So, my little pony savior," she said in her low, exotic voice, "This is still all part of the plan, yes?"

I turned on my PipBuck's lamp. "Somewhere in here, there has to be a way into the building."

"The plan to escape is to break into Red Eye's home?" I could hear the incredulity lurking behind her almost innocent tone.

I nodded. "We make it to the roof. There's always a Pinkie Pie Balloon anchored up there. We're going to take it. That's how we get past the moat and The Wall." I winced as I fought for breath. "I have friends waiting outside for us."

The zebra stared at me appraisingly. "Are all your friends as crazy as you?"

"You… don't have to follow me," I noted with a sigh. I had saved the zebra's life; but in doing so, I had kidnapped her. She couldn't go back to the slavers; we both knew that. Until she was past The Wall, I had pretty much trapped her with me. After that, however… "Although I really wish you would."

"You saved my life, little pony," she answered. "You are responsible for it now. It is up to you to get me to safety. Until then, I follow."

I nodded. "And after."

"You are still responsible," she said firmly. "Unless I take that responsibility from you."

I blinked. It was one thing to be thinking such thoughts. It was quite another to have them thrown back at me in some sort of insane zebra logic.

We trekked further into the tunnel, looking for a door into the old Ministry of Morale hub that Red Eye and Stern had made the center of their slave empire.

I was badly, badly hurt. But in my experience, I had a much easier time turning interiors to my advantage in a fight. I was feeling a touch of confidence returning.

The griffin with the missile launcher flew into the tunnel behind us. Both Xenith and I shrunk into the darkness around partial cover and held still. The griffin began to walk along the track, his eyes adjusting to the darkness.

I focused on the latch of his saddlebags where he was keeping his extra missiles.

Nothing happened.

I focused again. Harder.

Nothing. Not even a faint glow from my horn, much less a telekinetic field. I hung my head. Burnout. That save jumping the gap had taken what little I had left. I was defenseless. And useless.

Dammit… why did this have to happen *now?* I had been counting on my levitation to at least get us into the balloon. Now, we'd have to find another way to get into it. If there was another way. And if we survived to the roof. Which was now much more in doubt.

I looked back up in time to see a shadow move near the griffin. Xenith had slipped right up next to him, completely unnoticed. Only now did I spot her as she struck out with a hoof. The griffin made a choking sound as his body went rigid. She wasted no time snapping his neck with her forehooves.

I looked over the griffin as he fell dead beside the zebra. I wished he had been carrying a rifle. I did contemplate taking the missile launcher. But then (not being SteelHooves) I decided against it. Clearly Xenith preferred a stealthy approach to combat similar to my own. Plus, with my lack of experience, teeth-wielding high-explosives inside a building seemed like a very bad idea.

I also wished his armor was more pony-shaped. I did, however, empty his saddlebags and take them for myself.

I peeked around the corner, staring down a decaying pink hallway. Two ponies wearing armor in Red Eye's colors were standing guard near a wall terminal, watching over a shallow alcove opposite them. I thought I saw the glow of a Sunrise Sarsaparilla machine coming out of it. These guards weren't actively hunting us; but as best I could tell, there was no way around them. The only other way up had collapsed decades ago.

Still, I felt a pang at the idea of attacking ponies who weren't even threatening us, slavers or not. This stretched the definition of self-defense. I wondered if it would be possible to sneak past them; but the hallway was far too narrow, and they were standing with their tails to the wall. We'd have to pass directly in front of them. And no matter how light-hooved we were, crouching didn't make us invisible.

Xenith slipped past me before I could motion to her. She had no moral hesitation about killing random members of Red Eye's forces. To my surprise, she managed to creep halfway down the hall before they spotted her. She crossed the remaining distance with a leap, landing on her forehooves and bucking one of the guards in the head hard enough to send his helmet clattering down the hallway.

The other guard was a unicorn, and she was already floating an automatic rifle towards the zebra.

I screamed out at the pain in my legs as I charged the guard, lowering my horn. The unicorn turned, surprised by the second attacker, giving Xenith a chance to kick the automatic rifle. The magical field around it imploded as the weapon flew out of it and bounced against a dingy pink wall. My horn glanced off the guard's armor, hurting me more than her. Her horn was glowing.

Electricity burst around her, tearing at my nerves as I stumbled and fell to the floor. Between the guard's legs, I could see Xenith collapse as well. I groaned, remembering that (unlike me) other unicorns have more magic than mere telekinesis under their hats.

The unicorn wrapped her automatic rifle in a new sheath of magical energy and floated it over me, apparently considering a unicorn attacker to be the most dangerous threat. Fatal mistake.

The automatic rifle went off, peppering the ground next to me with bullets as Xenith swept the unicorn's legs out from under her. I was barely able to move, but the zebra seemed to have recovered most of her faculties. My striped companion rolled onto the guard pony and struck her repeatedly in the face with her forehooves. I cringed at the sound of the unicorn's horn shattering. The magic around the rifle evaporated and the firearm fell to the ground within biting distance.

By the time I had gotten up, rifle in mouth, Xenith had rendered both guards deceased.

I looked around. True to my suspicions, the alcove across from the guards held a couple of vending machines – a Sunset Sarsaparilla machine and a functional-looking Ironshod's Ammo Emporium. Between them was the heavy metal door of a vault.

"What is this?" Xenith asked, staring into the room that had been sealed behind the vault door.

She had been understandably perturbed when I stopped to hack the terminal, but relented when I explained that I needed to catch my breath. A statement my shallow, harsh breathing had proven altogether true. The worst part of my injuries was the fact that I couldn't risk healing them – not with a broken rib and punctured lung. Any poultice would cause those to heal wrong. I needed Velvet Remedy before I could dare use anything more than a healing bandage. And in our situation, I didn't even dare use painkillers. I needed to be thinking straight.

"The Wasteland, taunting me," I answered as I stepped into the vault, looking around at the mostly-empty shelves with their scattering of memory orbs – none of which I could look into without my magic – and the line of passkey-coded wall safes along the back – none of which I could open. The Equestrian Wasteland loved rubbing my face in my every moment of weakness.

"What are they?" she questioned, looking at the dozens of orbs littering the floor.

"Confessions."

I started collecting the orbs, picking them up in my teeth and dropping them into one of my pilfered saddlebags opposite the ammo and bottles of sarsaparilla. Moving through the shelves, I spotted the glow of another terminal. Perhaps there was a way into the safes after all.

Reaching it, I hooked my PipBuck into the terminal and began my hack. The terminal was exceptionally tough. The little pony in my head started crying out for Mint-als after the third time that I was forced to back out of the system before its security protocols could lock it up. I fought to silence that voice.

I was increasingly aware of how long this was taking. Stern had ponies scouring the building and surrounding grounds for us. They were spread out, but eventually one or more of them would stumble across us.

"One more try!" I insisted to Xenith after I backed out a fourth time. "If I can't get it, we go."

"Why are you trying to unlock Red Eye's safes anyway? What do you hope to find?" Xenith asked reasonably. "Balloon tickets, perhaps?"

I snorted. I was about to reply, probably with something snide, when I found the password: Sir Lints-a-lot. After staring at that for a moment, I no longer felt bad about not figuring it out sooner.

From the timestamps on the terminal, it became clear that nopony else had figured that out either. The terminal had not been used to access these safes in more than two hundred years. A security notice indicated that the far left safe had been accessed several times in the last few years through use of the passkey.

I opened them all.

The far right safe held a badly damaged memory orb case with a single orb inside. The other three were gone. There was also an audio log, a dingy cloak, a StealthBuck and half-a-dozen files. I caught Xenith's reaction as I pulled out the cloak, even though she recovered quickly.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," she lied.

I took the audio recording and memory orb, keeping them separate from the mess of orbs I had collected from the floor. I offered Xenith the cloak. Its dingy color would provide better camouflage than her stark stripes, and it was too large for me. She nodded and put it on, but it slipped off. The neck clasp was broken.

I opened the second safe and jumped back in alarm at the pulsing, swirling lights that poured out. Inside were four egg-shaped objects that glowed with a hypnotic dance of dark colors. “W-what?”

Xenith trotted closer, studying the objects without looking directly into them. “Balefire eggs.”

I stared dumbly for a moment as my brain deciphered this. That’s right. Fluttershy didn’t actually design city-destroying spells. She designed the magical framework that would take a normal spell and augment it beyond… well, beyond anything they really imagined. But like the healing spell, there had to be a magic to be amplified. These balefire eggs were the base magic for the mass-murdering balefire bombs.

“H-how big an explosion?” I asked my zebra companion.

“I don’t know. I was never alive two hundred years ago fighting in a war where these were used.”

Touché. I imagined the Ministry of Morale confiscated these on a raid of some sort. I could see why they would still be locked up.

The third safe held what looked like a Pegasus Enclave helmet with a built-in recollector, complete with black opal. It also held a whole lot of paperwork labeled “CZA”, including many photographs too warped by age to make out. I yanked the paperwork out, scattering it onto the floor as I tried to get at something that was hidden behind it.

“Citizen Zebra Activities,” Xenith said behind me, reading one of the folders I had knocked out of the safe. “Your government was paying close attention to every zebra living in Equestria.”

“Not my government,” I corrected swiftly. “And the Ministry of Morale was watching *everypony.*”

Behind the papers was what looked like a first-generation PipBuck. The PipBuck was still closed, and there were ancient bloodstains in the felt lining. It had been removed through amputation, hopefully post-mortem. I quickly plugged the PipBuck into my own and started looking through the files, but they were encrypted with that odd dual-encryption which I had discovered my first night out of Stable Two. The only thing I could get from it was an automapped floor plan for Stable Three. The Stable looked identical to Stable Two, except that the apple orchard was only two-thirds the size and there were two interlocking Overmare’s Offices. I shuddered inexplicably.

The final safe was the one Red Eye had been using. And it held the big prize.

The schematics for the Radiation-Powered Engine.

* * *

Xenith took an involuntary step back from the poster at the top of the stairwell. “Doombunny!” she whispered enigmatically.

I stared from my zebra companion to the poster and back. It was the same poster I had seen in the clinic, only this time in better repair: Fluttershy surrounded by animals, with the words “REMEMBER: We are all in this together! Care for one another.”

At first, I thought Xenith was referring to Fluttershy. It almost made sense; I could see Fluttershy being regarded as a bringer of doom and destruction, considering her connection to the megaspells. And she was abundantly cute.

Then my eyes caught the little white rabbit sitting on her head. My eyebrows went up and I turned to Xenith in disbelief. *“Doombunny?* Seriously?”

Xenith snorted. “You would not understand. You have not heard the tales of Fluttershy’s protector.”

My ears were tilted and I knew I was giving her the most astoundingly dubious look.

“Doombunny was a horror on the battlefield. Fluttershy came to heal, even the zebra soldiers, and her protection annihilated anyone foolish enough to try to attack her.”

“The… bunny.”

“oooh… Doombunny was more than just a rabbit. Doombunny was death with sharp, pointy teeth…”

She was messing with me. She *had* to be messing with me.

“…more powerful than a creature several times its size, thanks to the chemicals doombunny brewed in secret laboratories.”

“Chemicals?” This was insane.

Xenith lowered her face to mine, speaking in that odd accent. “Oh yes. Doombunny was a master in the laboratory. I also hear it could cook and toss a mean salad.” She smiled just a little. She *was* messing with me.

Although, from the look in her eyes, not entirely.

We moved on, finding ourselves, all too appropriately, in what seemed to be a research laboratory floor. Beyond the stairwell was a single door with a small window set into it. Through the window we could see a sprawling place dedicated to arcane and earth pony sciences. A huge picture window on the far end of the room glowed with the deepening red-tinted light of Fillydelphia. The day was ending. The sun would set soon.

We slipped through the door silently. The one pony trotting around inside had not noticed our entry. Xenith made quick work of him.

I put down the automatic rifle and started tugging off his lab coat. Xenith raised an eyebrow as I shucked it on. “It’s not much protection,” I admitted. “But anything is better than nothing…” I could have taken the armor from Red Eye’s guards; but after nearly being killed by a pegasus, I wasn’t going to make that mistake again. “…besides, it makes me feel more science-y.”

Xenith rolled her eyes then trotted towards the apothecary cabinets in the trot-in closet towards the back of the room. She put a hoof through the lock of the first one and pulled it open.

I pulled out the audio recording, downloading it into my PipBuck, intending to play it while we gave the room a look-over. My eyes fell to the schematics for Party-Time Mint-als. This research lab certainly would have everything I needed to make some, and I was feeling increasingly desperate.

It took a severe force of will to scroll away from the recipe. I forced myself to think of Calamity. Velvet Remedy. Homage…

I remembered Homage’s sweet voice. And something she said floated back to me:

…Oh, a mixture of Rage and painkillers. A friend and I found the recipe in the ruins of a

M.O.P. clinic when we were younger…

I blinked. Then called out to Xenith.

"Wait… you mean to tell me that *Fluttershy's pet rabbit* invented Stampede?"

* * *

"Hello?"

Rarity's voice asked in my earbloom as I started looking through the terminals and notes that filled the lab. It swiftly became clear that I was getting only one side of a conversation.

> *"Oh, hello, Your Majesty! How delightful of you to call!*
>
> *"Oh, same as always. So much to do, so many projects, and so little time! Honestly, half the time I feel the same about running a Ministry as Fluttershy felt about being a model! But the other half, I absolutely love it! Of course, I still find the time to create new dresses. And to get my beauty sleep. I think I'd go insane if I didn't… Oh, no no no. A few missed meals never hurt anypony. And it helps me keep my figure.*
>
> *"Yes. Yes I did hear what happened to Zecora, and I'm as enraged by it as anypony. I've already promised Pinkie Pie any resources my Ministry has to offer to help hers hunt down the brutes responsible and bring them to justice. …On the plus side, you have to admit, the new poster line is really effective."*

Rarity sounded legitimately upset about Zecora, and only thinly pleased about the effectiveness of her propaganda. The name was familiar. Oh yes, the zebra who was Applejack's friend, possibly a friend of all of them. I could see why Rarity would draw the connection.

> *"…Pinkie Pie? She's always eccentric darling! …No, not any more than usual… No, Princess Luna, I don't think you have anything to worry about. Strange and Pinkie Pie go hoof-in-hoof. You just learn to accept that about her and love her all the more for it."*

I recalled how Twilight Sparkle, in the Vinyl Scratch orb, had commented on everyone covering for Pinkie Pie and her addiction. I was immediately thankful I'd resisted the urge to make more Party-Time Mint-als.

> *"I will admit, however, that I am getting a bit worried about a few of my other friends. …Well, I've heard a rumor, just a rumor mind you, that Applejack is having some… trouble within her own Ministry. …No, I really couldn't say.*
>
> *"…And Twilight… Have you seen her recently? She's just exhausted! And terribly stressed out. The poor dear has taken on so much responsibility and so much work… Well, you have to admit, other than me of course, Twilight Sparkle is the only one who has really tried to run her Ministry, rather than just tossing ideas at them like horseshoes… And the less said about Rainbow Dash's 'Ministry', the better. …and with the big move underway; and Spike's started his draconic adolescence, so you just know he's a real saddle-full right now… No, no. But Princess Luna, I really think Twilight Sparkle needs a vacation…*
>
> *"No, everypony else is fine. At least, they were the last time I saw them. Fluttershy's doing brilliantly. I see her every week… I do wish I could see the others*

> *more often. They were my first real friends… my only ones, to be honest. And I miss them all terribly. But there's just always so much to do. I can't remember the last time we were all together… Oh, wait, I can. It was Pinkie Pie's birthday party. No, not this year's. Last year, I think. …Or was it the year before?*

For the first time in the conversation Rarity's voice faltered. I could feel the sadness she was trying to hide. It resonated deeply. Maybe because my heart held a similar ache.

> *"Oh no, I'm fine. It's just… sometimes it feels like we're pulling apart. And I can't stand to see that happen. I really must do something about it."*

I needed my friends. I was trembling from more than just pain as the audio recording drew to a close.

> *"No, Princess Luna, the pleasure was all mine! Thank you so much for calling!"*

* * *

I re-read the entries that had been concealed within the terminal at the lead researcher's desk. (A desk which had held an ashtray, a box of cigars and nearly two dozen bottle caps.)

Bypass spells. According to the research I was seeing, the *Ministry of Arcane Sciences* had cracked it already, about a month before the end of their world. They had even begun limited use, not for weapons but to create shield screens that would only allow specific materials to pass through.

Red Eye's research in here had been two-fold. First, his scientists had been working to apply a bypass to some sort of weapon effect. The full details had been redacted after the research had been successful. From what little I could read, that was less than a week before I had arrived. I was willing to extend the Steel Ranger's Elder the benefit of the doubt and assume she didn't know. The second line of research was ongoing, and had met with considerably less promising results – Red Eye was trying to figure out how to trick a Bypass into ignoring something it wasn't designed to ignore.

Xenith had filled a bag full of herbs and chemicals from the supply closet and was trotting back towards me when something outside the window made her freeze in her tracks.

I abandoned the terminal and moved to her side as quickly as my legs and breath would allow. I stared out the window as something huge came out of the red glow of the Fillydelphia Crater.

It was an armored black alicorn, easily three times the size of a normal one, the air about her rippling with power. She flew towards us, leaving swaths of energy in her wake.

"W-w-what is….?" I couldn't speak further. My mouth had gone dry.

"She's been basking in the radiation of the Fillydelphia Crater," Xenith commented. Then explained as if to a child, "The creatures of radiation do not merely heal in its presence. If they absorb enough of it, they grow stronger. More powerful."

Alicorns could become… massive, behemoth super-alicorns? I squeaked in impotent rage. "T-that's not fair!'

I looked up towards the sky, cursing Celestia and Luna in turn. Wasn't it enough that they were magically far more adept than I? That they were smart? Crafty? Fucking telepathic? With shields that only a small number of things could apparently get through? And they could fly?!

And go invisible? Or teleport?

I found enough voice to rasp at the heavens, "What do You want from me!? In Your names, what the fuck do You want!??"

A field of dark blue light wrapped around the enormous window. The glass began to vibrate. I had a sudden image of the abattoir that I had turned the maze of mirrors into.

"Run," I whispered to Xenith.

We turned and fled.

As we dived through the door to the stairwell, I heard that window shatter. And I heard none of the shards hit the ground. I spun and shoved the door closed behind us an eyeblink before the super-alicorn sent hundreds of lethal shards of glass into the door.

When the barrage ended, I lifted myself up and dared a peek through the little window on the door. I watched as the huge black alicorn swept into the room and activated her shield, a bubble of scintillating force expanding around her with enough power to tear into the floor and ceiling, blasting apart desks and chemistry sets. The energy sloughing off the bubble caused nearby terminals to explode in sprays of sparks. I saw the automatic rifle which I'd left behind fall through the broken floor into the level below.

Well, at least I didn't have to worry about destroying the research.

I turned away, terrified, and discovered that I could make myself gallop far faster than my body wanted to let me. It hurt, my chest raged as if I was breathing liquid fire, but I ran.

⁂

The alicorn blasted up through the floor into the hallway. Her size was too big to comfortably move through the space, but it hardly mattered. Her shield just ripped away the walls as she passed near them, chewing up parts of the offices on either side.

The thought flashed through my mind that she might just bring this whole building down on top of the three of us. Her horn blazed with an almost black light. Her shield dropped briefly as she lashed out with dark energies that only crudely resembled black lightning.

I tore around a corner, my body feeling like it was about to explode and then explode again. Xenith was in front of me, moving far more gracefully. The hallway behind us was shredded with a smell of ozone and black licorice.

I followed her up another flight of stairs, screaming out in agony and hating the building for making us climb when the damn monster behind us didn't have to.

The super-alicorn tore through the ceiling, hovering in front of us as we made it to the top. I stumbled and crashed to a stop, realizing with utter loathing that we would have to go back down. Only my body didn't want to move anymore. My body wanted to just give up and die.

I felt Xenith bite into my mane and toss me onto her back.

The giant black alicorn spread her wings and pointed her horn. A point of light flickered in the front of her shield then spiraled to create an opening. I realized with dismay and amazement that even if I had my magic, it would be useless. This alicorn's shield was so powerful even *she* couldn't cast a spell through it.

Xenith went down, dropping me like a sack of pain. I saw her twitching.

Heart attack spell. She would be permanently damaged or dead within seconds.

I screamed! At the super-alicorn for being so ridiculously powerful and evil and totally unfair! At the Goddessess for allowing such a nightmare to exist and for making me face it and just after I had lost my magic too! At the Fillydelphia Crater for being so damn radioactive!

With a rage-fueled strength beyond what I could actually muster, I wrenched my suffering body off the floor and galloped at the creature which I suddenly realized looked an awful lot like those old pictures of Nightmare Moon. I leapt, jumping partway into the opening of the super-alicorn's shield. The edge cut deeply into my chest, like I was hanging on a curved razor blade. I struggled, cutting my self even worse, my blood poured down both the inside and outside of the shield.

The alicorn at least had the grace to look shocked. I had successfully caused her to drop the spell attacking Xenith's heart.

I couldn't get inside with her. But with a mortally wounded cry, I tossed my head back, pulled open one of my saddlebags, and dumped the contents inside the shield.

Dozens of memory orbs scattered along the bottom of the magical bubble. The alicorn glanced at them and was unimpressed. She turned her attention to me. In a panic, I realized what was about to happen and kicked myself away before the hole in the shield scythed closed. If I had been any slower, the super-alicorn's shield would have cut me in half.

I collapsed, bleeding heavily on the floor. That was it. I was done. Time to sleep now.

But as I passed out, there was a slight smile on my face, despite all the pain. I had saved Xenith. And I had proven that you could trick one of these fucking cunts the same way twice.

The last thing I saw before darkness overwhelmed me was the alicorn floating in her impervious bubble, cut off from every danger except for a few dozen memory orbs. And four balefire eggs.

I never heard the explosion. But Xenith later told me it was… loud, only louder.

* * *

When I awoke, we were in a buck's bathroom. I was propped up in a stall, looking out at a poster of Pinkie Pie (watching you piss forever?). I didn't hurt anywhere near as much as I should, assuming I wasn't simply dead (and really, who would put a Pinkie Pie poster in a bathroom in heaven… or for that matter, in a bathroom anywhere?), which worried me considerably. I felt light-headed and… odd.

I looked down. I was wrapped in healing bandages. Probably three or four medical kit's worth. There were more on the floor next to me, blood-drenched and spent. I had been in here for some time. My mind grudgingly realized I was doped up on painkillers.

This escape plan was going well.

Xenith trotted back into view. "You are an insane pony."

"Thank you."

"I wish I could let you rest some more, but we must go. We are being hunted."

I nodded and tried to get up. My limbs didn't want to co-operate. A moment later, I once again found myself riding the zebra, slung over her back like an old carpet. I blushed with embarrassment and hoped I didn't bleed all over her. I wondered what riding like this would do to the wounds on my breast, and how well the magical bandages had healed my other injuries. My left shoulder no longer hurt, and my right leg felt only mildly sprained.

Xenith picked up my saddlebags with her teeth and then added them across her flanks along with her sack of apothecary supplies. I helped tie it to her securely.

My striped companion crept through the floors swiftly yet cautiously, clearly trying to keep ahead of something. I knew we were being hunted by Stern's slavers. But something about this felt different. My thoughts turned dark. After the super-alicorn, I wasn't ready for another surprise opponent.

"What's after us?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Winter," Xenith whispered in an ominous tone.

My painkiller-fogged mind fought to make sense of that. "It's summer," I responded blandly.

The zebra snorted. "Red Eye's cyberdog. Winter is tracking our scent."

My mind replayed part of a broadcast from Red Eye that I had found particularly striking: *I was lucky, fortunate beyond my deserving, to be blessed with safe places to roam, security from the fiends and horrors of the Equestrian Wasteland, and companionship in the form of my beloved dog, Winter. Oh, the adventures we had.*

If he was but a colt at that time, the dog should have passed away naturally from old age. But now I imagined that instead of letting that happen, he'd cybernetically enhanced it, replacing part after part as each failed. It was macabre.

I groaned. I really, really needed to get out of Fillydelphia.

We made it up two flights of stairs without trouble. Three times, Xenith managed to creep past slavers unnoticed even with me on her back. As we passed an open office, I could see the overhang of eves out the window, shadowed in the light of a setting sun that turned the world outside the color of a bloody river. We were almost to the roof.

I heard a low, tinny growl.

I looked back. Behind us, I saw a half-robotic dog stalking towards us. Winter was more machine than animal. His brain was encased in a lightly glowing tank which looked so shockingly like that of a brain-bot that I began to assume it wasn't ponies but pet dogs whose brains were used in those awful things. Winter's forepaws ended in claws that looked like they were made from the clawtips of hellhounds.

Even Xenith didn't want to fight that thing. The zebra bolted, galloping as fast as she could. Winter howled and gave chase, the glow of his brain-case shifting to crimson.

I wished I still had the automatic rifle. Or, for that matter, any weapon at all. Somehow, I didn't think I could strike it down with baleful looks.

We made it to the stairwell marked "Roof Access", the cyberdog nipping at Xenith's hooves. I realized belatedly that the dog could have jumped and started tearing me apart, but it chose not to. We were being corralled.

I turned to warn Xenith. Before I could, we burst out onto the roof. Xenith skidded to a stop, trapped between the Ministry of Morale roof and the cloudy, blood-red sky.

The anchored Pinkie Pie Balloon was still there. But so were two others, with a third closing in. Half a dozen anti-machine rifles were trained in our direction.

With a clear note of sarcasm, Xenith asked, “Still according to plan, right?”

Winter came out behind us and stopped as if guarding the door back.

* * *

I closed my eyes, waiting for the shot. But the sniper ponies were hesitating. Waiting for something. The growl behind us gave Xenith a clue. “Red Eye’s coming.”

So, the bastard was going to take care of us himself? Fuck that. “Oh, come on!” I yelled up at the giant, inflated Pinkie Pie heads. “Just do it already!”

I was exhausted. The painkillers were wearing off and the pain was beginning to flood back in.

A pillar of golden flame, tinged with balefire green, shot out of the Fillydelphia Crater. The bolt of light reached its apex and spread out wings that flared across the sky like a second sun.

Pyrelight dipped and swooped towards us, burning with an aura of emerald and gold nearly a hundred times her size.

The creatures of radiation do not merely heal in its presence. If they absorb enough, they grow stronger, more powerful.

Sorry, Celestia, Luna… for everything bad I thought!

The incoming Pinkie Pie Balloon erupted in flame just at Pyrelight’s passing. The majestic harbinger opened her beak and bright green balefire blasted out, tearing across the roof above us. All three of the Pinkie Pie Balloons ignited, becoming infernos. Bits of burning balloon and slaver flesh rained down on us as the blazing zeppelins began to collapse, sinking towards the amusement park below. I hoped nastily that it was full of slavers surrounding the building.

“Pyrelight!” I cheered, clopping my hooves in applause!

Xenith stared upwards, having lost the very notion of speech.

The cyberdog panicked and fled down the stairwell.

Pyrelight swooped around. I could see the energy she had absorbed was already bleeding off of her, like the scintillating waves that came off the black alicorn. The bird dived, and I thought I could hear the crackling of fire and the sound of slaver screams below.

I was so overjoyed at the turn of events that it took me several minutes to realize that Pyrelight had incinerated what I had hoped to be our ride.

We were still trapped in Fillydelphia.

* * *

Our capture was as ignominious as it was inevitable.

I found myself staring through a haze of red. Not a fault of my own vision, but a property of the room we had been marched into. The air was filled with some sort of odd steam. My already strained lungs pitched a fit as I attempted to breathe it. Red lamps lined the room, diffusing their light to make the air take a sickening scarlet tint.

There was a line on the floor that the well-armed griffins beside us had warned us not to cross. Winter crouched nearby, ready to launch himself at the first to run. With Xenith's skills, I thought it might still be possible to fight our way out of the situation. But the very idea made me want to drop from weariness.

Red Eye trotted in through a door on the opposite wall next to a large, dark screen. He raised a hoof and the griffins flanking us took their leave. I heard them lock and bar the door behind us.

"Littlepip," he said graciously. "Sit, relax. I mean you no harm."

Obviously, the same couldn't be said for us. I was still processing the mere notion that Red Eye would lock himself in a room with us when Xenith charged at him, murder in her eyes.

She slammed against an invisible wall hard enough that she was lucky she didn't break her neck. I stared around and realized suddenly the reason for the odd atmosphere. "You're using the reddened mist to conceal an alicorn shield," I surmised aloud. I was actually slightly impressed. "You must have at least two of the green ones doing their statue thing just behind the walls."

Red Eye beamed at me. (Literally – in the mist, the line of red light shooting from his cybernetic eye was clearly visible.) "I wanted us to be able to talk freely. Without anypony attacking anypony else." He shot a wry look at the recovering zebra.

"What do you want?" I asked dourly. There was only one reason I could think of for him to spare us. And I didn't like it.

"All I want you to do is something you were going to do anyway," Red Eye said in a tone both casual and infuriatingly confident. "I just want you to do it on my timescale."

Great. My mortal enemy had a quest for me. My life sucked.

"I want you to kill the Goddess."

My jaw hit the floor.

Okay, I did *not* see that coming. "B… but you serve the Goddess! You… you're Her high-fucking-priest!"

Red Eye scowled slightly, sitting back. "I like to think of us more like… partners. And sadly, the partnership is no longer beneficial to my goals." He looked me over, ignoring Xenith completely. "And after your handling of the Crater Alicorn, I really do think you have what it takes to succeed."

"Do tell." I glowered.

"As I'm sure you've noticed, the Goddess controls Her children. Telepathically. They are not so much individuals as they are extensions of Her will. And they will remain so until She is finally put to rest."

I nodded solemnly.

"There is no point working towards the freedom of all ponies if Unity comes with chains," Red Eye pontificated. "There is no room in the New Equestria for slave masters, and no room for slaves."

Xenith nickered, "Not much room for *you* then." I smiled, my own sentiment echoing hers.

Red Eye regarded us calmly. "No. No there is not."

Okay, second time he caught me by surprise. "What do you intend to do then? Kill yourself?"

He laughed. Red Eye had a charismatic, likeable laugh. I hated him for that. "No, no.

I plan to ascend. Once you have taken care of the Goddess, it will finally be time for me to join Unity myself. But not as one of the rest of you. Somepony will have to take up the tasks that the Princesses and pegasi left to run wild, after all. Somepony will have to regulate the weather, to raise the sun and the moon."

I blinked. "Okay, I've got a new theory. You're a loony." Seriously, the Goddess couldn't manage these things, much less an alicorned earth pony.

Again he laughed, setting my nerves on edge. "Well, then I will fail. But either way, I will be out of your mane. You won't have to worry about me further. And won't that be nice? Crushing two eggs under one hoof?"

I really hated this stallion. "And what about all your work," I argued. Dammit, the one reason I was at all hesitant to take down this monster was because even I could see the good his efforts would eventually bring about. I could… admire what he was building, even if I hated how he was doing it. "What about the schools? The hospitals? Rebuilding an infrastructure that will allow Equestria to pull itself out of this post-apocalyptic pit?!"

Red Eye feigned contemplation. "Oh, dear. Well then, I suppose you'll just have to take my place and see it through."

My jaw was on the floor again. Once more, he had blindsided me. How did he keep doing that?

"You want me to… what?"

Red Eye smiled. "Want you to? Or just expect that you won't let all this just fall apart. Of course, I'm sure you'll try to find a way to accomplish all this without the regrettable horrors of slavery. And, with at least the foundation I've managed in place, you might even succeed." He gave me a gracious bow. "I certainly hope so." Then added in a businesslike tone, "The Goddess is still in Her… home in Maripony."

I realized there was another horseshoe waiting to drop.

"And… so you'll let me go?"

The black-maned cyberpony nodded. "Somewhat implicit in the request." Without even looking at Xenith, he added, "And you can take your new zebra friend with you. The two of you seem to be… effective together. Agree, and she has her freedom."

Xenith stared at me with an unfathomable expression. I knew she wanted her freedom enough to risk her life for it, to kill other slaves for it. Was she asking me to accept? Or was she warning me about deals with devils?

"And if I refuse to kill the Goddess?"

Red Eye frowned. "Well, I would prefer not to resort to threats. But let's just say that by succeeding, you will save the lives of your friends in the tower."

No! I should never have sent them into that place alone! Oh Goddesses, what had I done?

"W-what have you done with Calamity, Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves?" I demanded in a frightened voice. "Are they okay?"

Red Eye's one real eye blinked. "Oh, you mean your assault team at the Fillydelphia Tower station? I sent Stern on ahead with a full squad of her best to give them a warm greeting. I'm sure at least one of them survived."

I swallowed hard, feeling all of Equestria fall out from under me. "I… I want to see them."

Red Eye nodded graciously. He trotted to a button on the wall beneath the large screen. “Stern, report. I have somepony here who wants to see the captives.”

The monitor screen lit up. For a moment, all it showed was ruins and blood.

Then a hoof rose up, tapping on the screen. “Hey!” Calamity’s smiling face and orange mane came into view. “Ah think this here just turned on!”

I could hear the low grumble of SteelHooves voice, “Calamity, don’t mess with it.”

“Oh, hold on,” Calamity said, looking slightly up. “Hey, Ah can see Li’lpip through this thing now. Heya, kid!”

This was obviously not the response Red Eye had been expecting. I felt a crippling surge of relief and collapsed to the floor.

“oh, an’ y’all must be Red Eye. Can’t say it’s ah pleasure t’… whoa! Y’all are a cyberpony! Ah didn’t think those were even real!”

Red Eye finally found his voice. “Calamity, is it? I take it you have killed…”

“Yer welcomin’ party? That who ya was expectin? Sorry, but they all can’t make it on account of them bein’ mostly blown up.”

“Mostly?”

“We kept yer griffin gal all safe an’ cozy. Trust me, she ain’t hardly hurt, and she ain’t feelin’ a bit o’ pain,” Calamity said with a mock friendliness that didn’t touch the steel glint in his eyes. “Figured things mighta gone a bit south fer our friend Li’lpip, so Ah decided we oughta keep someone fer trade.”

* * *

I watched as the drawbridge lowered over the moat. On the other side, through the electrified gate, I could see Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves flanking a thoroughly trussed-up and glowering Stern. Calamity was sitting sniper in an undisclosed location.

I could almost feel the air grow colder when SteelHooves’ gaze fell on my striped companion.

Red Eye stood next to me, protected inside an alicorn shield – the projecting alicorns were hidden in a sewer passage right beneath us yet safely out of Calamity’s field of view. “Remember my offer, Littlepip. Kill the Goddess…” he whispered to me, clearly unconcerned that the Goddess’ children might hear. (Judging from my experience on the roof of Horseshoe Tower, I strongly suspected they couldn’t hear anything at all.) “…and you not only get rid of her, but you get rid of me. And save your friends in the tower.”

I blinked then turned to him with a cross stare. “I think we’ve already established that threat is pretty stupid.” I pointed a hoof at my friends waiting for me on the other side of the gate.

Red Eye cocked his head, and for a moment I think he was actually confused.

“Ah. I apologize for the misunderstanding. I don’t mean *these* friends in *that* tower…” he said, nodding towards the rising white needle of the Fillydelphia Tower. “I mean your friends in Tenpony Tower.”

I felt my blood go cold.

“Now, I know that the damn building has already survived one balefire bomb, but do you really think it could survive another?”

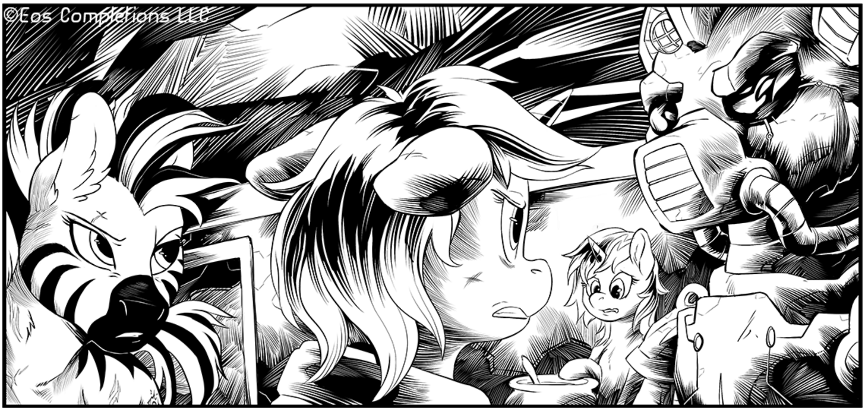
Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Gladiator Pony – The action point cost for all unarmed attacks performed in S.A.T.S. is reduced by 10%

Quest Perk added: Fillydelphia Survivor – Your vicious fights behind The Wall in the Fillydelphia ruins have left you stronger. Your damage threshold is increased by two and your radiation resistance increases by +3%

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Distress Signals



"When the walls come tumbling down, when you lose everything you have, you always have family. And your family always has tribe."

Family.

It wasn't a word I'd had much use for, nor a concept I'd felt any connection to.

I had never known my father (a quite uncommon situation for a filly growing up in Stable Two). When my mother had been my age, she had spent a large portion of her time being… well, there were other words I would use if describing other ponies. But this was my mother. And for her, I chose the words "promiscuous" and "inebriated".

Growing up, I did have my mother. But my memories of her were largely of the "sit quietly while the grown ups are talking" variety. However, she did teach me games. And even though I came to realize (even as a blankflank) that she did so more to alleviate her boredom than my own, I cherished each happy memory of playing with her – every game of boards and strategies and brightly-colored pieces that the Stable had to offer.

But even then, I never really thought of us as "family" in a way that attached special meaning to the word.

Now, through a haze of pain, I realized this was changing. Had changed already, in fact, without my knowing it.

With the painkillers worn off and adrenaline no longer propping up my body, I could feel just how much pain I was in. The bandages had helped and probably spared me from bleeding out through the deep slashes in my chest. However, continuing to push myself while injured had harmed more than just my magic.

But I was with my friends now. There was a feeling of completeness and safety. My body could finally relax and just hurt.

Velvet Remedy had slipped into mother-doctor mode almost at the sight of me. Now that I wasn't mentally sniffing between her hindlegs anymore, I found myself comforted by her fretful ministrations, particularly considering that she did a much better job of mothering me than my actual mother ever had.

In truth, these ponies had become my family. Family in that deeper sense of the word that means finding "home" not from the location you are at but through the people you are with.

…And my family was having an argument.

* * *

"She's a zebra!" SteelHooves exclaimed. He had kept his silence until we were well away from The Wall. But as we had approached the crumbled ruins of Java's Cup, SteelHooves had finally questioned the presence of my new companion. I made the mistake of simply saying she was a friend.

"Yes, she is." I was weary and hurting. My breathing was shallow, and I felt like I was constantly drowning. I wanted a bath to wash off the blood caking my coat, the stinging powder still chewing into my flank and the last of the nasty little biting insects that somehow survived along with me. And I wanted a bed that was at least softer than cement. What I did not want was this argument.

"Who has clearly manipulated you into trusting her," SteelHooves surmised. "You can't trust them."

Xenith had wisely remained silent, simply choosing to follow as we moved away from The Wall and the slave pits of Stern's Fillydelphia. But now, nettled and perhaps feeling bolstered by my assertion of friendship, the zebra retorted:

"The war is long over, and I had no part in it. Just because I have stripes does not make me an enemy combatant any more than that armor makes you a soldier in Nightmare Moon's army."

Brilliant.

"Princess Luna's army," snapped the Steel Ranger who had indeed served in the war two-hundred years over. "Not that your kind has any right to even speak the name!"

He turned to me, "Littlepip, what are your intentions regarding the zebra? Please tell me you don't actually expect her to travel with us."

"Oh heavens no," Velvet Remedy chimed in. "I'm sure she doesn't. After all, it would just be foolish to travel with the sort of creature known for degenerating into mindless, flesh-eating…"

Xenith drew up, staring at the charcoal-coated unicorn with a look of bewilderment bordering on resentment.

"…oh wait, those aren't zebras." Velvet casually finished. "Those are *ghouls.*"

SteelHooves stopped now too, and I was sure that behind his visor he was glaring. Xenith huffed, still confused. In her exotic accent, she slowly asked Velvet, "Are you saying… I look like a ghoul?"

I hung my head. This was going downhill fast.

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened as she realized how Xenith had taken the statement. "No, of course not," she assured the newcomer. Then cryptically mused, "But somepony here sure smells like one."

Xenith sniffed at her own coat. I rolled my eyes. Then, just to be sure, sniffed at my own. And gagged a little. I was *rank.*

Calamity swooped up to us. He had been waiting for us in front of Java's, Spitfire's Thunder held in his mouth. (Java had apparently been – based on the large sign collapsed over the door – a milk-colored stallion whose mane was a wavy light brown with dark brown streaks and whose cutie mark was a steaming cup of what I hoped were coffee beans.) But when we stopped moving forward, he decided to close the gap himself.

He landed next to me, slipping the magically-enhanced anti-machine rifle into a newly-fashioned holster on his battle saddle, and offered Xenith a hoof and a smile. "Well howdy!"

I wanted to kiss him. (Which was not a desire I normally associated with bucks.)

Xenith looked hesitant. She reached out a hoof tentatively, and then shrank back, wide-eyed, as Calamity took it in both his forehooves and shook vigorously. "Pleased t' meetcha. Ah'm Calamity." Her foreleg was still shaking after he let go. "Welcome t' the team."

"That is it?" she asked cautiously, still looking at Calamity as if she'd never seen a pegasus before. (Which, I realized suddenly, was probably the case.)

"Aw shucks," Calamity said, still grinning. "Ah saw y'all through the scope. Clearly, Li'lpip here trusts ya. An' if she trusts ya, that's good 'nuff fer me."

"Yes," Velvet said in a drawling yet lady-like sigh. "Because Littlepip's judgment has been Celestia Tier recently." She was looking over my injuries with growing dismay.

"Okay, okay! Yes, it was a stupid plan! I'm sorry." I looked to my friends desperately. "I knew it was going to be bad in there, and I didn't want to put any of you through that. I *know* I should have trusted you to handle yourselves, and that we should have stayed together. We're stronger together…" I'm pathetic without you.

I collapsed to my knees, suddenly overcome with fatigue.

Velvet Remedy's horn began to glow as she waved everyone else to be quiet and stand back. A moment later, my unicorn friend gasped. "By the Goddesses! Littlepip… what happened to you in there?"

* * *

Velvet Remedy knelt next to me as I stretched out on a mattress in what had once been a child's bedroom. We had invaded a small apartment building that had once shared a Fillydelphia city block with Java and his cups. I could see the others in the next room. Calamity was sorting through the small items he had scavenged from the apartment. Xenith was cooking. SteelHooves was glowering.

"Ah gotta wonder why they even bothered?" Calamity mused as he stared at the boards which he had pried from across the door an hour ago. They now served as wood for a cookfire. "Ain't like anypony who's determined and capable 'nuff t' brave inner-city ruins is gonna be stopped by a couple planks o' wood. Why bother boardin' up the door in the first place?

Xenith had found some cooking pots and was brewing something sweet-smelling over the fire. Several other pots sat around her, each waiting for a turn under the flames. I marveled at our good fortune. Ever since I'd left Homage, I had bemoaned our lack of a skilled chef.

I winced. What I wouldn't give to see her right now. Instead, she was in mortal peril, and I… I felt myself flush with angry guilt that I wasn't doing something to help her right that instant. I cursed Red Eye. "Why did he have to go after Homage?"

"Ah don't figure he did," Calamity suggested from the other room. "I reckon he's aimin' at DJ Pon3. Buck's been broadcastin' good things 'bout ya fer a while now, so's that prob'ly gets him chalked up as a friend that Red Eye figures you'd want t' keep from harm."

"Assuming he hasn't simply surmised that you want to keep *every* soul from harm," SteelHooves added grimly. "And that you will go to absurd and dangerous lengths to do so."

I felt the urge to remind him that it was a Steel Ranger Elder who pitched the plan, but I bit it back. SteelHooves had never suggested or pressured me to go along with the solo mission, merely supported me when I made the decision to. Considering the tones of his previous conversation with Elder Blueberry Sabre, I suspected SteelHooves would have just as swiftly backed me if my decision had involved telling her to sit on my horn and spin.

I looked from SteelHooves to Calamity, again struck by the difference between them when it came to support. Calamity was loyal. SteelHooves was… obedient. Not necessarily to me, but to whomever he accepted as in charge. He was a soldier buck even now.

Velvet Remedy's glowing horn passed over me once more. She was making sure she had found every injury. As I had expected, my broken rib and punctured lung had drawn the most reaction from her (including a whole host of dark looks at Xenith that SteelHooves couldn't match). But she commended the zebra on not feeding me any healing potions, voicing confidence in her mending spells.

She gasped as she started to pass her horn over my tail. "Littlepip!" She leaned close, her voice scandalized and sympathetic. "How did you get wounded *there?*"

"That wasn't me," Xenith's voice sounded from the other room.

"What?" Calamity looked up tensely. "Who hurt Li'lpip where now?" I buried my face in my forehooves, feeling my cheeks redden with embarrassment.

"Never you mind," Velvet told the pegasus sternly as she opened her saddleboxes and floated out an array of medical supplies. Calamity's scavenging had restocked us well in that regard.

It didn't help that my worry over Homage had brought with it half-formed daydreams of the wonderful grey unicorn kissing that very wound to make it better.

Gracefully returning us to the earlier conversation, Velvet Remedy suggested, "I know you are worried about Homage, but please try not to let it eat at you. Remember, so long as Red Eye doesn't act on his threat, he has something to threaten you with. Once he does, all he has is an angry Littlepip. And if he's half as smart as you make him out to be, then he's plenty bright enough to know he doesn't want that."

I bit my lower lip.

Calamity stood up, shaking his head. "Ah hate t' be the voice o' worry, but…" The pegasus paused uncomfortably, brushing a hoof over his orange mane. "Well, Ah figure if he put that megaspell at Tenpony Tower, he musta done so b'fore he hatched his plan t' use ya. So the only thing keepin' him from using it is that deal o' ya."

I frowned. "So… do you think he'll set it off the moment he knows the Goddess is dead?" I hadn't even considered that. "That is, if I do that?"

Calamity nudged his hat. "Ah… don't rightly know. But DJ Pon3 is a dissentin' voice with a huge audience." Calamity's frown deepened. "Most dictatorships Ah know of tend t' go hell-an'-highwater t' either discredit or destroy opposin' voices like that."

I almost asked how many dictatorships Calamity knew of. But the words died on my lips as a memory floated to the surface of my mind:

Don'tcha believe 'em, Calamity had once told me. *The Enclave has a vested interest in makin' anypony who bucks their ideals inta a monster.*

Instead I nodded, trying to give him a supportive look.

"Stern cuts out the tongues of any who speak ill of Red Eye," Xenith reminded me, putting a little extra loathing into the griffin's name. "I spent several years speaking nothing so that I might keep mine." She added, "It is good to finally use it freely again."

SteelHooves grunted. "Now that we're all together, I don't see why we don't just call his bluff. Fly in and level his operation. Take him out."

I sighed deeply. "First, because taking him out wouldn't be that easy. Elder Blueberry Sabre was right about that. He's always protected, and he can get out faster than we can get to him…"

What I didn't say was that I wasn't sure I wanted to flatten his operation. In fact, I was sure that I didn't want to destroy the work he was doing. I wanted to free all the slaves. But that wasn't the same thing. Was it?

Dammit! It was easier to know my moral stance before I discovered that the evil fucker was also, as best I could see, *right.* He *was* building a better future… or, at least, parts of one. And he was sacrificing everything for it, from his own home to your freedom.

I recalled a conversation with Watcher regarding how, without what he called "the spark", the virtues he valued could become twisted, lost parodies of themselves. I had found another in Red Eye: Generosity. Even generosity could wander down twisted, dark paths… especially when what you are giving away shouldn't be yours to give.

SteelHooves nickered. "You don't actually believe Red Eye has a megaspell, do you?"

I grimaced.

"An undetonated balefire bomb? When would he have acquired something like that?" SteelHooves questioned. "Where? It's not like you can stumble over something like that just laying around."

Velvet Remedy, Calamity and I all exchanged looks.

"Oh no…" SteelHooves groaned. "What did you three do?"

The building was silent, save for the crackling of the fire and the bubbling of the cookpot, for several long minutes in the wake of our explanation.

"You gave a *balefire bomb* over to New Appleloosa?" SteelHooves exploded, pacing in his heavy armor, his metal-sheathed tail flicking in emphasis with each word. "A town notorious for trading with Red Eye's slavers?"

"Ayep."

"Which one of you *idiots* came up with that idea?" SteelHooves demanded.

I silently tore through my memories. I remembered being concerned about sending the freed slaves back to New Appleloosa. Stunningly, I couldn't recall having the same concerns about giving them a megaspell.

Calamity raised his hoof, a chagrinned expression on his face.

"This is…" Xenith asked, "…why they call you 'Calamity', yes?"

Velvet Remedy moved to sit by Calamity's side.

SteelHooves was fuming. "You do realize that Red Eye is the only reason there even is a New Appleloosa, right?" His visor turned towards us and found only blank expressions. "That place was a small town dying in the dust before Red Eye pranced in and gave them a water talisman. You've got to figure they *owe* him!"

Calamity shook his head, genuinely surprised. "Sorry, pardner, but that's a new one on me." I, however, merely groaned, putting my hooves over my eyes.

I saw the bounty of our Stable shared, the water talisman given to a struggling town which now knows the joy of clean and pure water.

Homage was going to die, and it was my fault.

* * *

My PipBuck was clicking at me, not letting me ignore that the water I was bathing in was radioactive. Velvet Remedy had a dose of RadAway sitting nearby for me to consume as soon as I got out of the grossly-stained tub. Pure water was a rare treat in the wasteland; even those who had it would not think to squander it on baths. Not unless they lived someplace with a water talisman like Tenpony Tower. And in the Fillydelphia Ruins, *all* the water to be found was irradiated.

The clicking of my PipBuck reminded me that my weeks in the Equestrian Wasteland had been, in many ways, blessed. I had avoided some of the more repulsive hardships that many ponies faced every day. I had never been reduced to drinking radioactive water from the bowl of a toilet.

There wasn't much of a wall left between this apartment's bathroom and the living room, so I was effectively bathing in front of them. Xenith was still tending her boiling pots. Velvet Remedy moved between helping me scrub places that I normally called on my magic to reach and watching Calamity as he tinkered with broken radios he had found in the other apartments, rebuilding one with parts cannibalized from the others. SteelHooves stood guard near the door.

The radio Calamity had been rebuilding flared to life.

"Yea-haw! Welcome, ponies of Fillydelphia! This is DJ Pon3 beaming a light into even the darkest parts of the Equestrian Wasteland! You can't stop the signal, baby! And thanks to that kid from Stable Two, the message is reaching even the souls trapped in that Celestia-forsaken hellhole. Looks like our plucky Stable-Dweller galloped into the heart of Red Eye's slavery operation and gave the old bastard a big black eye… in the form of losing nearly half his dirigibles and a small army's worth of his slavers. Not t' mention annihilating the Crater Boss. And she even took Red Eye's right hoof griffin, Stern, down a peg. Aaaaand that's not all! Our little Wasteland Heroine, our Bringer of Light, bucked right through the wall that Red Eye had built around Fillydelphia's airwaves, bringing my humble message into the one place I could never reach before! Thank you, Stable Dweller!"

I sunk deeper into the bath and moaned. The elation I felt at hearing Homage's voice (disguised as it was) in this horrible place battled the humiliation and dismay at hearing my royal fuck-up described as a brilliant victory. I did not earn this.

"If you should happen to see our Light Bringer, give her a big thanks! She'll be easy to recognize, should she keep in the company of the zebra slave she rescued as icing on the cupcake in her latest escapade. And for the rest of you still toiling away in Fillydelphia, our hearts go out to you, and your plight has *not* been forgotten. Plus, I offer these small words of hope: knowing our Light Bringer, I don't think she's done with Red Eye yet!"

Xenith stared at the little radio, blinking slowly. "How does he know so much?" We had walked across the moat and outside The Wall less than three hours ago.

The zebra looked at my companions, "And why does he not give you the credit you deserve? Much of the victory was yours. As was our escape, for which I am most thankful."

Calamity chuckled. "Aw, shucks. T'weren't nothin'."

Velvet Remedy purred, "Because we asked… DJ Pon3 not to mention us. Littlepip here should get all the credit."

I groaned. It was a conspiracy.

I started to get up and say something, but Velvet Remedy put a hoof to my muzzle, then whispered into my ear, "Oh, and don't think I've forgotten about that 'barn door' comment." She smiled as I collapsed with a splash under the weight of my embarrassment.

DJ Pon3's voice continued bringing news and advice to the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland. I felt a chill as DJ Pon3 talked openly with us, having no idea she was in mortal danger.

"Warning to all those traveling central Equestria. Keep your hooves away from the areas surrounding Ponyville. I'm getting reports of fires along the back end of the Everfree Forest. They seem to be spreading slowly, but the advancing flames and smoke are pushing many of the forest's unpleasant inhabitants towards the Ponyville side of that nightmare zone, and at least a couple monsters have actually wandered their way into the old town itself. Fortunately, the only ponies living in that area are raiders. So, to the monsters, I say bon appetite!"

"Well, if it ain't one thing, 'tis another," Calamity neighed, pointing out that Splendid Valley was beyond Ponyville in the opposite direction. Fortunately, we would be crossing the area well above ground level, so we should be able to fly clear of any trouble.

"Unless, o' course, the critters wanderin' out o' that place include manticores or the like."

Knowing my luck, and the Equestrian Wasteland's maliciousness, they would be angry dragons.

"Well, it's another hard day in this Equestrian Wasteland, but I've got the news and the music to get you through. So say bye-bye to stupid static, and hello to magnificent music! This has been your host, DJ Pon3…"

The voice of Homage's broadcast persona gave way to one of the newer songs on DJ Pon3's playlist. Something from a record I had rescued out of Stable Twenty-Nine.

"Do you dream…?"

* * *

I felt immensely better after the bath. As Velvet Remedy wove her horn about my broken body, mending my rib and lung with her beautiful magic, I began to drift to sleep.

SteelHooves walked in. "Littlepip, can we talk? About the zebra."

I released a long-suffering sigh. This again? Lamely pretending to mishear, I replied. "Candy Hawk? Sorry, don't think I've heard of her."

"Funny," SteelHooves said dryly. "Littlepip, I need to talk to you."

"You need to go to the zoo? Fine. Need the four of us to come with you?" I put a little emphasis on the number four, only to realize that, with Pyrelight, it should have been five. Where was that magnificent bird anyway?

Snickering softly, Velvet Remedy stood up and trotted over to the Steel Ranger, head down. She pressed against him, wrapping him with a telekinetic field of her own, reducing the massive weight of his armor so that she could shove him out the door. "Sorry, SteelHooves. Too busy saving Equestria today. All prejudice has to be rescheduled. Is next month good for you?"

SteelHooves nickered with a stomp. "You might accept having one of those traveling with you, but even if I did, there is no way the Steel Rangers will let her trot into their citadel and live." He looked at me over Velvet's scarlet-and-gold streaked white mane. "Or am I wrong that you have further business there?"

I buried my face as I realized the ghoul stallion had a point. Stable-Tec's old headquarters was my first intended stop. I had some things to… discuss with Elder Blueberry Sabre. But that wasn't someplace I could take Xenith. I'd have more luck walking into the Steel Ranger's citadel with an alicorn in tow and trying to convince them she was friendly.

Velvet Remedy had him all the way through the doorway when I finally said, "SteelHooves, I have welcomed Xenith to join us. She's here as long as she wants to be. If that's a problem for you, then you are free to be elsewhere." I stared at him with what I hoped was a gentle expression. "Remember, Applejack herself offered her hooves in friendship to a zebra…"

The response I got back was an unexpected growl. "Yes. And if you only knew how that ended, you wouldn't speak of it!"

Wow. Minefield. "Okay… but somehow I've become the leader of this merry band of ponies, and I've decided to give her the chance. If you want to stay with us, you will too. I won't have Xenith *mysteriously disappearing* when my back is turned…"

Velvet Remedy gasped sharply at my insinuation. She didn't know the patterns of behavior I had seen in Applesnack's memories and looked appalled that I could suggest one of us capable of such things. I envied her innocence. SteelHooves himself was silenced.

"…So long as you are with us, you *will* love and tolerate the shit out of her. Consider that an order." I stared at him, giving him one chance.

"That said," I added reluctantly, "You are absolutely right about the Steel Rangers. I won't be bringing her with us into the Stable-Tec building. Which… ugh… means we'll have to split up again. If only briefly."

SteelHooves stood there for a moment, then gave a rigid nod. As he turned to trot away, he nearly ran into Xenith, who was trotting up with a small, covered cookpot hanging from her mouth. They stared at each other awkwardly, then danced about each other. Velvet Remedy backed up, letting Xenith through the doorway, then closed it behind her.

Xenith lowered her neck, placing the pot on the floor. “Once again, it would seem that I am the subject of an argument.”

“You *were* the subject of an argument,” Velvet Remedy corrected gently.

“Is that not what I said?” the zebra asked, perplexed. I covered a snicker with a hoof.

Velvet Remedy gave up with a roll of her eyes. “And what is that?” she asked, pointing at the cookpot with a hoof. Her ears tilted back. “Please tell me there is no meat in that.”

Xenith looked quite surprised. “Of course not. Zebras are vegetarians… as I thought were ponies. Are you not?”

I could see the relief wash over Velvet Remedy as a look of joy broke over her face. “Yes! Yes we are! Thank Celestia… finally!” She slid up to Xenith, wrapping a foreleg around her neck, seemingly oblivious to the way Xenith suddenly tensed. “Oh, we are going to be the best of friends, you and I.”

Velvet Remedy backed up, looking over Xenith. “And Littlepip isn’t the only one in need of medical attention.” The mother-doctor side of Velvet was instantly back in control as she pulled the top mattress off a set of bunk beds and insistently guided Xenith onto it.

But the nudge to lie down was the final straw. Xenith jumped away, spinning and knocking back Velvet Remedy’s nudging hoof with enough force to send Velvet stumbling back with a tear in her eye. “I do not like to be touched!” the zebra spat.

Velvet Remedy blinked, falling onto her haunches, holding her bruised forehoof against her breast. I felt like I was frozen. Part of me needed to jump between them, to do something. But the situation had changed so rapidly my brain was still catching up.

“Oh.” Velvet blinked. Her eyes widened. “OH!” She stared back at the tense zebra mare with an expression flooding with compassion. “oh, Xenith… I’m so sorry!”

I had not told anypony what Number Four had told me about Xenith’s abuse; I did not feel I had the right. Velvet Remedy didn’t need me to; she had figured it out for herself. Not the details, thank the Goddesses, but enough.

Gingerly putting her sore hoof down and standing, Velvet Remedy apologized again. But with that apology came insistence, “I will not touch you casually without permission. That was wrong of me. But I am a medical pony, and I will need to touch you to treat your physical wounds.”

“I can do that well enough on my own,” Xenith nickered.

Velvet nodded. “I am sure you can. But I can do it better.” There was no boast. And after Velvet had been able to treat my rib and lung, there was no question that she was right.

“You deserve a lot better treatment than you’ve been getting. From others in the extreme, but also from yourself. Let me give you the level of care you need” Velvet whinnied. “At least, to the best of my ability.”

Xenith neighed. “I came in here to deliver a gift for the little one, not to be prodded and treated by a medical pony.”

They both turned to look at me. I was half tempted to pretend I couldn’t hear them again. Ugh. Our family had clearly grown big enough that somepony needed to lay ground rules. But why should it fall to me? Considering my whole lack-of-family experience, wasn't I the *least* qualified?

"Xenith," I said gently, "In this group, we have to trust each other with our lives every day. We care for each other, and each one of us uses our talents to help all of us." I stopped as I recognized my line of thought was wandering. Re-adjusted. "You are very welcome here, and I do hope you stay with us. But being a part of this group will call for some sacrifices. You told me that I was responsible for you now. That includes making sure you are properly cared for, and this is how I choose to do that – by having Velvet Remedy care for you like she cares for the rest of us." I looked at the zebra, adding, "Unless you choose to release me from my responsibilities."

Xenith's eyes narrowed. But slowly, she laid down on the mattress. "No, I do not, little pony."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Velvet Remedy moved carefully towards the zebra. She stopped as she passed the small cookpot still resting on the floor. She sniffed at it. "Xenith, what is this gift?"

"It is a restorative brew," Xenith told us. "It will replenish and heal your horn of the magics you overtaxed in our rescue."

I blinked. On one hoof, this was extremely welcome news. The last time I had burned out, it had taken days to recover. With Red Eye's threat hanging over Homage, I couldn't afford to be ineffective that long. On the other hoof, I couldn't help but question what a zebra could know of unicorn magics, much less remedies for uniquely unicorn ailments.

"I know many of the ancient mystical recipes. Ones to cure, to enhance and to harm," Xenith told us. "If I have the right ingredients, I can brew potions that will permanently alter and strengthen you, making you better fit for the fight ahead."

Alter? I didn't think I wanted to be altered.

"This is not such a potion, but I have what is necessary to craft one of these elixirs – one which will strengthen your bones such that they will be much harder to break. I will brew this for you… if you allow me to."

Velvet Remedy looked skeptical. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea. Nor this gift, for that matter." Before either of us could protest, Velvet reminded me, "Littlepip has had some bad experiences with zebra 'medicine' before. She is particularly susceptible to their dangers."

Xenith looked between us. "I would not offer an addictive draught, nor give a cup too full." The zebra frowned at Velvet then turned to me, "You just said that here you allow each other to share their talents. Will you not let me share this one with you?"

Velvet nickered at the way Xenith used my own argument so swiftly. The zebra cocked her head. "You have seen Red Eye, have you not? That pony has augmented himself with machines and technology. If the little one truly chooses for him to be her mortal enemy, then should she not take advantage of the gifts I offer her? If Red Eye is also my enemy, should I not offer them?"

My answer was to get up, walk to the cookpot and lift away the lid. The brew inside smelled sweetly spicy, the steam that rushed out cleared my sinuses. With only the slightest hesitation, I began to drink.

* * *

My magic had been completely spent. After drinking Xenith's potion, and a night of rest, I still couldn't lift the now-empty cookpot. But I believed I could feel the stirrings of my magic. And I knew one test which called for only the tiniest spark of focus and power.

I laid one of the memory orbs on the apartment floor. I had sacrificed all save for the two I had taken from the safes in my battle with the super-alicorn. But those two had been put in the other saddlebag. I laid down, leaning forward and concentrating as I touched my horn to the orb…

* * *

Flashes of light burst across the night – scores of cameras capturing the moment for a mob of news-ponies and paparazzi. They mixed with a throng of ponies shouting protests and holding signs in their mouths. My host was standing on a set of marbled steps, looking down on them and watching a quartet of armored police ponies push their way through.

I was encased in armor, but unlike my experience in the mind of Applesnack, this armor did not feel heavy or claustrophobic. I could, in fact, barely feel it at all. The limited vision, the Eyes-Forward Sparkle that played behind the visor and the smell of trapped pony sweat were the swiftest indications of how I was clad. (A very *nice* scent of mare-sweat, I could not help myself from thinking.) With an unpleasant shock, I realized I could feel my wings. I was in a pegasus pony.

To each side of me stood more pegasi wearing the sleek, black carapace armor I had come to associate with the Enclave.

As the police ponies broke through the front of the crowd below and started up the steps, I could see they were escorting a zebra, bound in chains and encircled by the armored ponies.

One of them stepped forward, speaking to somepony just behind me. "We caught her in Ironshod Firearms, red-hoofed, trying to steal the schematics for the anti-machine rifle."

The zebra protested her mistreatment. "I haven't broken any rule; I was invited there you fool!" Her exotic accent was like Xenith's, and I recognized the odd rhyming that seemed to flow in all her speech. Lowering her voice loudly, Zecora asked the lead pony, "So are you always such a tool?"

"I knew it!" cried an equally familiar voice from behind me. The pink party pony advanced into view, glaring daggers at the zebra. "And to think I let you trick us into trusting you! You… you trickster!"

Zecora looked hurt. Pinkie Pie didn't relent, breaking into furious sing-song. "She's an evil enchantress and she does evil dances…"

"Pinkie Pie, you have me wrong. I am not like your foalish song."

"Don't even try to entrance me, Zecora. I… Never again." Pinkie Pie turned from her, scowling. It was the first time I had really seen the Mare of the Ministry of Morale angry, and it was terrifying.

In a low voice, she grumbled, "I hope you really like rocks!"

Pinkie Pie looked up at me, then jabbed a hoof towards two of the armored pegasi on my right. "You and you, help escort my *old friend…*" Pinkie Pie hissed the words between clenched teeth, "…to the convoy. Zecora will be spending the rest of her life as a guest of Shattered Hoof. Tell them that I want *all* of that zebra's memories. And don't. Be. Too. Gentle."

The two pegasi on my right rushed to obey. Pinkie Pie pointed her hoof at me. "You, with me."

The pink earth pony stomped back up the steps and into what I assumed was a Ministry building. My host turned and trotted after her, following behind Pinkie Pie as she crossed the darkened, spacious lobby towards the elevators. Under her breath, Pinkie Pie continued to sing venomously, "…she'll mix up an evil brew, and swallow you up in a big, tasty stew!…"

She stopped singing in the elevator. Which was good, since the song would have clashed unpleasantly with the lullaby version of *March of the Parasprites* that was playing inside the lift. Pinkie Pie turned and pushed all the buttons simultaneous with her rump.

The elevator took us directly to a large office with a huge plate-glass window that looked out over… Canterlot.

Pinkie Pie strode dangerously into the middle of the room, then turned, fixing me with the sort of malevolent expression that made me think she might carve me up and bake me into a cupcake. Then in a magical instant, she broke into a huge smile that seemed to light up the room. She waved a hoof in a sweeping bow, her voice bursting with joy: *"ACTING!"*

The aging pink earth pony collapsed onto the floor in a fit of giggles. "Best! Prank! Ever!"

My host humphed and trotted over to the window, looking down below. The Eyes-Forward Sparkle started identifying ponies and wagons in the street below. The convoy carrying Zecora to Shattered Hoof was already rolling out under a light guard supplemented by the two pegasi in magically-powered armor.

I felt myself lift the visor. In the window, my reflected face was blue, with magenta eyes and a shock of rainbow-colored hair matted between them. Pinkie Pie's reflection appeared on the window next to me. "Zecora's gonna be all right," she asked, a note of true concern in her voice. "Won't she Dashie?"

I saw and felt my host nod. "She's been with the best trainers the Ministry of Awesome has. I wouldn't let this move forward if it were otherwise."

Pinkie Pie nodded and turned her stare to the convoy below. It was already two blocks away. Pinkie Pie paused, lifting her left forehoof and wiggling it. "Huh."

Rainbow Dash ignored this, eyes narrowing. "Extraction by traitorous zebra sympathizers in three…"

"Two!" Pinkie Pie looked back down, excited. "Ooooh, Zecora's gonna make such a good spy!"

"One…"

There was a flash down below as the first wagon in the prisoner convoy exploded. Dark figures rushed in from all sides amidst flashes of muzzle-fire.

Rainbow Dash pushed down the visor. "And here. We. Go."

* * *

I sat in the apartment common room, trying to float small objects. I had made it up to levitating a pack of bubblegum. (Which, honestly, was the only thing I imagined the package was good for anymore. Who would even try to eat two-hundred-year-old bubblegum?)

Over breakfast, a meal which in content was indistinguishable from dinner, the conversation had turned towards more open introductions and an attempt by the others to get to know Xenith a little better in return for regaling her with stories of our adventures over the past five weeks.

"I have never seen a bloodwing," Xenith admitted, "But I have seen the dessicated husks their preying leaves behind. Still… wouldn't a missile be a little excessive for killing one?"

"SteelHooves ain't never been one fer underkill."

The ghoul snorted. "You should talk. Tell her about your solution to the alicorns chasing us through Manehattan."

"Actually," Velvet Remedy interrupted, "I think it is Xenith's turn to share." She gave the zebra an encouraging look and suggested, "Why don't you tell us a little about where you learned those brewing skills of yours?" Velvet was purposefully suggesting tales of a time that must have been before Fillydelphia, steering the zebra's memories and our conversation away from more dangerous and hurtful paths.

Xenith hesitated, but relented as the silence stretched out. "I learned the brewing of potions and remedies both mundane and magical from my grandparents. In their youth, they had been adventurers of sorts, prying into all the forbidden places – even delving into the Everfree Forest in search of the Hut of Zecora and braving Lookout Plateau that rises above the dark fumes of Froggy Bottom Bog along the vilest stretch of the Ponytomic – searching out old recipes and lore of zebra-kind that had been over a century lost. It is from them that I learned the ways and tales of the zebra people… or as much as I know of them."

I looked up from my task of stacking bubblegum and bullets into a tiny fort. Somehow, the idea of the zebras as Equestrian scavengers not unlike myself was surprising. I don't know what I had expected. Something more military and uniquely zebra, I guessed.

"My great grandparents were amongst the survivors of Stable Three, as were most zebras in the Equestrian Wasteland. As is typical for youth, my grandparents rebelled against their parent's ways and sought to learn more about the zebras beyond the tales passed down through oral tradition since The Sealing."

I didn't need clarification on what The Sealing was. Nopony who lived in a Stable would. But I did wish to know more about the Stable whose floor plan I had in my PipBuck. "Stable Three?"

SteelHooves grunted. "The Let's-Get-Along Stable," he snorted derisively. I saw Velvet's ears perk at that.

"It was clearly an experimental Stable," SteelHooves rumbled. "Virtually all of the zebra citizens of Equestria were 'randomly assigned' to Stable Three. They would have made up half of the Stable's population."

Xenith frowned at the unpleasantness of the interruption but nodded at SteelHooves' assessment. "It was long before even my grandparent's time, but the stories passed down say that the Overmares told all in the Stable why they had been chosen. And why the Stable had no texts of history or posters of current events."

Ah. Instead of altering things, Scootaloo and her friends had simply filtered out as much of the Ministry of Image's influence as possible.

Velvet Remedy questioned, "Overmares? Plural?"

Xenith nodded. "One pony and one zebra."

My experience with Stables was clawing at the back of my mind. Still, if there were survivors… "What went wrong?"

"Why would you assume something went wrong?" Xenith gave me a questioning look. "Zebras and ponies can live together quite harmoniously if each gives the other the opportunity."

SteelHooves again provided the answer I was looking for. "Stable Three was built within the limits of the one city in Equestria with more than a hoof-full of zebras," he informed us. "Canterlot."

Oh no.

Xenith saw my expression and nodded glumly. "Not even the Stables could hold back the Pink Cloud forever. Stable Three lasted over a century before the Cloud ate its way inside. Within a generation more, those who still could were forced to unseal the door and flee. Many did not survive the exposure; my great grandparents were amongst those who did."

* * *

"You… killed a dragon?!" Xenith stared between Calamity and me, her eyes wide. They narrowed as she asked me, "Is this true? Or is this revenge for Doombunny?"

"Doombunny?" Velvet Remedy asked curiously.

Calamity pulled a book from his saddlebags. "Ah'm guessin' somethin' t' do wi' this."

I focused, trying to wrap the book in a field of magic. I broke a sweat, but the book dutifully floated over to me on a cushion of levitating energy. *Martial Arts of the Zebra* announced the title.

"Where did you find this?" I asked as I flipped the book open to the contents page.

"Filin' cabinet at the station," Calamity said matter-of-factly. "Strangely, it was under 'P'."

I shrugged that off. The prologue spoke of the zebra's rich history of martial artistry, from the many fighting styles that had been perfected over centuries (such as *Fallen Caesar Style*) to newer ones. The newest of which had been only been in existence for a couple years at the time this pre-apocalyptic book had been written, and focused on drug-enhanced martial prowess: *Doombunny Style.* The book's author spoke ill of it for having undefined "influences" from the lands of the ponies.

I closed the book, intending to read it later.

Xenith tapped a hoof in thought. "Littlepip, with your permission, there is someplace I would like us to go. I understand that there are other matters pressing, but this is important to me."

"Of course we… wait, how come this is my decision?" I looked to the others. "Why do you ponies keep acting like *I'm* the leader?'

"Littlepip's right," Calamity neighed. "Anyway, we do have more pressin' matters, so Ah think we should first hear that plan. What's next?"

I nodded thankfully and laid out the plan. "We need to go to Stable-Tec Headquarters first. I have something that Elder Blueberry Sabre wants, and I plan to use it to barter for access to the Stable-Tec maneframe."

SteelHooves whinnied questioningly.

"Red Eye is building a fortress called the Cathedral where Stable 101 used to be. I figure the Stable-Tec maneframe has record of the location of all the Stables, so that's the fastest way to find out where Red Eye's main base is located."

I looked to Calamity, "After that, I say we fly as fast as we can to Tenpony Tower and begin an evacuation."

Calamity smirked and turned to Xenith. "Ah'm sorry fer interruptin'. Jus' provin' a point. Now go on wi' what ya were askin'?"

I blinked, lost. "Huh? What point?"

Xenith gave her own smirk back, answering kindly. "I believe you just demonstrated to everyone but yourself why you are the leader."

I stared. What did she…? Oh *fuck.* I shot Calamity a dark look, but the buck just grinned. *Luna clop me with Her wings.*

"You could go yourself," SteelHooves suggested to Xenith as non-nastily as he could.

Xenith nodded. "Yes, but the journey would be long and dangerous alone. I would prefer to arrive later than not at all." She looked to me, "Although should you refuse, then I will take my leave as soon as your travels bring us within a few days of my destination."

I nodded. I wanted to immediately agree, but it seemed wise to ask, "Where do you need to go?"

"I… need to return to my tribal home. The village that had been mine and my family's until Stern's slavers descended upon it."

"Your family?"

"My parents and husband were slain in the fight. My daughter…" the zebra choked before plowing on. "My daughter was too young for Stern's slave pits, and not a pony so she had no place in Red Eye's schools. So Stern left her there, along with the other children."

Velvet Remedy whimpered, shedding the tears that the zebra seemed unable or unwilling to. My own thoughts traveled back to the words of one of the raiders in Shattered Hoof, speaking about how her own town had been treated to the same, with the children left behind to fend for themselves. She had fled into the life of a raider to escape the horror her town had descended into under the rule of slaughter-scarred bullies and traumatized children.

"It was long ago. Years. I doubt my daughter would know me should she still survive." Xenith's face was sorrowful but her voice was steady. "Any claim I had as her guide and guardian I lost in the years since. I only wish to know."

“You really shouldn’t be going anywhere,” Velvet Remedy chided as we made our way towards the Stable-Tec building, itself walled off from the rest of Fillydelphia like Stern’s city in miniature. “Except to a medical clinic for a week or two of recovery.”

She was probably right, but we couldn’t afford a week. I felt guilty for having selfishly stolen most of a day for resting. But once my magic had grown strong enough to lift Little Macintosh, I knew it was time to move.

A small family of scavengers spotted us on the street and scurried for cover. It hurt to think that ponies once greeted each other as they passed on the street. That cheer and open neighborliness had once been the social norm. In the Equestrian Wasteland, a stranger pony was met with guarded suspicion, assessed first for threat potential. I gave the scavengers a smile and a friendly hoofwave as we passed. It wasn’t returned as they cringed, the adults hiding the younger ponies behind them, weapons ready should we attack like a band of raiders.

I hated the Equestrian Wasteland. Especially Fillydelphia.

“Oh my!” Velvet Remedy burst out, eyes wide with wonder. “Aren’t you just *magnificent!”* She trotted quickly ahead of us.

Pyrelight was perched on the fountain statue of Sweetie Belle, glowing brilliantly. She had bled off most of the endowment from the Fillydelphia Crater, but her aura was still five times her size, lighting up the Steel Rangers’ outer courtyard with golden radiance.

My heart went out to the balefire phoenix, immensely grateful for her companionship when I was behind The Wall. I too began to trot towards her, a tear in my eye.

My PipBuck started clicking, informing me that being in Pyrelight’s vicinity was even less healthy than bathing in Fillydelphia water. I drew up short and watched as Velvet Remedy floated a bottle of RadSafe from a saddlebox. She downed more than the recommended dose before trotting right up to the radioactive bird and nuzzling her gently. Pyrelight cooed.

Well, at least Velvet Remedy wasn’t spending nearly as much time inside the Fluttershy orb since Pyrelight joined us. I had mixed feelings about the trade.

“All the ponies in this crowd are crazy,” Xenith muttered as she walked past me.

I moved up to Xenith. “Um… this building belongs to the Steel Rangers. I think maybe it’s not so safe for you to come in with us. Would you mind waiting outside? It won’t be alone, and I hope it won’t be for long.”

Xenith considered me. “And whom did you intend to keep me company?”

I knew I needed Calamity’s combat prowess backing me up, just in case my meeting with Blueberry Sabre went south. And not only did I want a Steel Ranger at my side for diplomatic reasons, I didn’t trust him alone with Xenith quite yet. Velvet Remedy, on the other hoof, would enjoy having some time with Pyrelight… and I certainly wasn’t taking the glowing ball of regal radiation in with me. I told Xenith my decision.

The zebra nodded. “As you wish. I will remain here with unicorn Fluttershy and her balefire Doombunny.”

Okie dokey lokey.

“Perhaps… you could work on that brew you offered me?” I suggested, taking a plunge. I wanted to show the zebra my trust, and give her something to do while we were gone that she would find productive. I didn't really want to be altered. I had a hard enough time entering the memories of folk whose bodies were significantly different than my own. I didn't know how well I could handle living in one.

But…

Xenith was right. Red Eye had his own advantages. I had to at least seriously consider putting my squeamishness aside and taking those offered to me.

Xenith smiled. "As you wish."

* * *

"…those fires I reported yesterday appear to be the work of Red Eye's private army. Griffins sporting the slaver king's colors were spotted flying over the far side of the Everfree Forest carrying incinerators. But where any other woods would be consumed in flame by now, these fires are spreading extremely slowly. Looks to me like the Everfree Forest is fighting back."

DJ Pon3's voice came out of the wall speakers in the Stable-Tec visitor's lounge. We listened as I waited impatiently.

"And one last bit o' news for all you faithful listeners. Looks like Red Eye's set his sights on Tenpony Tower. Fortunately for the folks in that place, it's built like a fortress. And the only entrance is both well-defended and tricky to access. The ponies of Tenpony Tower are barricaded inside, safe and sound for now. There's plenty of stockpiled food and water, and the new constable chief is doing her best to organize rationing, so they should be able to hold out until help arrives."

I jumped to my hooves at that. "No!" I shouted at the speaker. "They're not trying to invade. They're trying to seal you in!"

"And now for something a bit unusual. I don't normally read mail on the air, but I have a personal message here from my assistant Homage to the Stable Dweller. Ahem. Dearest Littlepip… aww, now ain't that sweet? I think somepony has a crush. Dearest Littlepip, I know things sound bad here, and I know it's your nature to try to rush to our rescue; but we're okay for now, and you have other more pressing matters closer to home. Do what you need to do, take care of them first. Then, later, we can meet where we met before, and I promise to give you so many orgas…Oh! Well now that's not something I'm comfortable readin' on the air. I think I'll be having a little talk with my assistant.

"Meanwhile, here are the silky-smooth tones of Velvet Remedy singing about what gets her through life in this post-apocalyptic wasteland!"

I stared at the speaker, my body locked up, my jaw on the floor, heat rushing to my face and other places. Velvet Remedy's beautiful voice poured through the speaker, replacing the voice of DJ Pon3, but I barely heard it.

What I meant to say was "I can't believe she just did that!" What I actually said was closer to *"squeak!"*

Calamity snickered, tears in his eyes, then collapsed onto his back in laughter.

* * *

"What do you mean the Elder *isn't here?!"*

"The Elder has been called away on an urgent crusade and is not available," Knight Poppyseed claimed. "However, she said that in the case you should return, I may receive what you have recovered."

I stomped. "I was under the impression that these things were important to you ponies! Or at least to her, considering I risked my life for them and all!"

"She wasn't actually expecting you to survive," SteelHooves deciphered. From his tone, he wanted a few words with the Elder himself.

I glowered at the mare in magically-powered armor. "Fine. I can report that Red Eye's research into Bypass Spells has been destroyed." I hadn't scavenged any of it, and would have not given it to these ponies even if I had. But I did know that at least part of the research had been successfully completed. I could tell her that. But really, fuck these ponies.

"I have recovered the schematics to the Radiation-Powered Engine. And I'm ready to turn them over to you…" after having made copies, but I didn't feel the need to tell her that. I had no problem giving the Steel Rangers this technology. I intended to give it out to any pony with a chance of implementing it. This was the sort of step forward that all Equestria could potentially benefit from, but not if it was being jealously guarded by only a few.

That said, I'd be damned if I wasn't going to get something in return this time. "…in exchange for access to the Stable-Tec maneframe."

Knight Poppyseed sputtered at that. "I'm sorry? No, there is no way…"

Calamity stepped up next to me, fixing her with a dangerous stare. "Ah reckon we ain't exactly askin'. Y'all owe Li'lpip, an' we're takin' payment. Now why don't we do it all friendly-like?"

The knight mare looked to SteelHooves for support.

"I'm a *Star Paladin,*" my armor-encased companion reminded her smoothly. "In the absence of the Elder, I am the ranking Ranger on this base. And I order you to take us to the Stable-Tec maneframe." He turned his stare to me. "I will personally make sure Littlepip doesn't access any information vital to the security of the Steel Rangers or the Ministry of Wartime Technology."

Knight Poppyseed nickered, but turned obediently and began to lead. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"No."

* * *

The room was cold and dark save for the blinking lights of the maneframe. From the locks on the door, the turrets outside and the hoofprints in the dust, I could tell this room was not only restricted but rarely entered.

I hoofed the light switch, but the room remained dark. I turned on my PipBuck lamp and looked around. The spotlight on SteelHooves' helmet hummed softly to life, cutting a beam of light through the darkness. He followed me in.

Instead of moving directly for the maneframe, I allowed my curiosity to drag me around the huge basement room. At the far end was the huge, gear-shaped door of a Stable. It rested against the open doorway, not attached. By removing my saddlebags, I was barely able shimmy through the entrance. According to the number, this was Stable 0.

Beyond stretched the rooms and hallways of a Stable maintenance wing. But the hallways dead-ended in shallow caverns of dirt. The rooms were unfinished. Toolboxes and construction equipment lay scattered everywhere. Several sections of the walls and ceilings had collapsed.

In one corner, I found the curled-up skeleton of an earth pony. The floor around the pony was littered with empty bottles. I shook my head as I noticed the liquor had been applejack. There was a black opal laying on the floor next to the tattered remains of a recollector. The lower bone of the earth pony's left foreleg wore an early-model PipBuck.

I plugged my PipBuck into it and found a single audio recording. Sitting down, I let it begin to play. The voice on the recording was soft, almost overwhelmed the background noise of sirens and bombardment.

> *"Ah don't really know what ta say. Or, for that matter, whom Ah'm sayin' it to. The good news is that Sweetie Belle's got muh family safe an' sound in Stable Two. Ah dunno where Scootaloo's at, but Ah'm glad she's not…"*

A particularly loud roar drowned out everything else, followed by the sounds of metal and concrete collapsing within the unfinished Stable as a maelstrom devoured the city above.

> *"…Fillydelphia was just hit. That's it then… it's all over. Everypony's dead… except for the ones we could save. Celestia dammit, Applejack, couldn't ya have stopped this from happening? Couldn't anypony have stopped this?"*

I heard a furious clicking. I checked my PipBuck, but the radiation meter was safely in the green.

> *"No, no, no! Ah didn't mean that! Ain't Applejack's fault. Hay, it's more muh fault than hers. An' Ah know Ah ain't s'posed ta feel that way, but Ah do sometimes. An' Ah guess it don't really matter anymore. Everypony's dead now. Ah'm dead now. Ah didn't survive the megaspell just cuz Ah lived through the blast. We never even got the door on. Radiation will kill me."*

The clicking was coming from the recording.

> *"Ah just wanted t' tell anypony listenin' that Ah'm sorry. Even if it's not muh fault all those kids are dead. Ah'm still sorry. Ah tried t' make up for it. Ah really did."*

* * *

SteelHooves was calling for me.

"I'm fine!" I called back, wiping tears from my eyes. "I'll be out in just a minute."

Before worming my way back out, I knelt down and picked up the memory orb in my teeth. Once back in the basement proper, I put the orb in my saddlebags and proceeded to the Stable-Tec maneframe.

The maneframe was a tricky hack, but either I had grown more skilled or Pinkie Pie's had been easier. I downloaded all the information I could on the various Stables and began sifting through it for the one piece of information that interested me most. The location of Stable 101.

I found it and the answer surprised me.

Once I was reunited with all my friends outside of the Steel Ranger's citadel, having given Knight Poppyseed the schematics I had promised in return, I told everyone what I had learned.

"Stable 101 was built within the Everfree Forest itself." The looks and gasps were exactly what I expected. "Apparently, there used to be an old castle on a safe patch of land in the middle of the place. That's where Stable-Tec built their last completed Stable."

Xenith was the first to make a particular connection. "So Red Eye is building his fortress in the middle of the Everfree Forest… and is burning down the forest around it? Why?"

"Hard t' maintain a growin' army in a space where the wildlife wants t' disembowel ya an' suck the juices, Ah imagine," Calamity theorized.

"Agriculture," I answered with my own guess. "You said it yourself, Calamity. The Everfree Forest was never hit by a megaspell. As far as cropland goes, the Everfree Forest is one of the few places that isn't poisoned with radiation or taint."

Xenith agreed with my line of thought. "And after the burning, the soil will be rich with nutrients from the ashes." She looked grim, slipping unconsciously into the sort of rhyming speech I was used to hearing from Zecora. "I worked for months recycling flamer fuel for Stern. Clearly he was stockpiling plenty for this burn."

"And when he's done, he'll put up a wall around the whole place and have complete control over the food," SteelHooves agreed, glancing back towards The Wall that Red Eye had erected around two-thirds of the city. "It's what he does."

* * *

* * *

"Do ya think She'll like it?" Apple Bloom asked, fretting over an exquisite model of an almost monastic walled village. The design looked familiar; I had seen the remains of this model on display outside of Elder Blueberry Sabre's chambers.

"She'll love it," I felt and heard myself say. The voice was not immediately familiar, and completely lacked the country drawl of the younger mare. This Apple Bloom, dressed in the manner of formal attire that she had not yet grown comfortable with, was no older than me.

"Do you think She'll like the crenulations?"

"She'll love the crenulations," my host assured her gently. "The crenulations are fine."

"How about the moon in the center courtyard? Maybe I should have gone with a full moon rather than a crescent moon…"

"She'll love the moon. The moon is fine."

Apple Bloom trotted nervously around the table, eyeing the model from every angle. The room we stood in was a glowing white marble with flowing curtains and golden filigree in all the accents. If we weren't in a palace, then somepony had gone to great lengths to give the impression of one.

"How about the tower? Is it too short? Or maybe it's too tall?" Apple Bloom hoofed her ears in frustration. “Arrrugh! I don’t even know if Princess Luna *likes* towers! Why didn’t I ask that earlier?”

My host let out a long-suffering whinny. “She’ll love the towers. The towers are very nice.”

Apple Bloom reacted like she’d been struck. “Nice? But they need to be *perfect!”* Apple Bloom’s agitation was strong enough that she nearly hovered. I thought the young mare could spontaneously combust from stress.

“Calm down, child. I’m sure Princess Luna will love all of it.” I felt myself smile as soothing words came from my muzzle. “Princess Celestia wanted the greatest architect in all of Equestria for this project, and She made sure She got it.”

Apple Bloom quaked a moment, then calmed with a breath. “Thank ya again, Uncle Orange, fer accompanying me t’ meet with the Princess. Ah don’t think Ah coulda done this on my own.”

“You’re doing a far sight better than your sister ever managed. But try to watch the country drawl. Remember, sound sophisticated and you show everypony that you are sophisticated.”

“Yes, Uncle Orange. Ah’ll… I’ll remember.” Apple Bloom returned to fretting, but a more subdued fretting.

“You should be proud,” Uncle Orange said encouragingly. “This is the sort of project that will make you renowned across all of Equestria.”

Apple Bloom simply nodded. The fame didn’t seem to interest her. However, “With the bits I get from this, Ah’ll… sorry, I’ll be able to expand muh… my business. Hire more help. Maybe start looking into other sorts of designs.” She looked up with a smile. “Scootaloo says she’d like to invest now that Red Racer is doin’ so well. Maybe build a company together…”

Apple Bloom’s voice fell away. Another presence entered the room. An exalted one. My host dropped gracefully into a bow. Apple Bloom swiftly followed his example.

I was in the company of a Goddess!

Not one of those blasphemous pseudo-goddess alicorn monsters. I found myself kneeling before the Goddess of the Sun whom I had prayed to since I was a little filly: Celestia Herself!

She was majestic beyond description: a tall, white, *proper* alicorn whose mane and tail flowed with color, Her flank emblazoned with the symbol of the sun itself. She was graceful, kind and altogether sovereign.

“Please,” She addressed us graciously, “Rise, my little ponies. It is a joy to see you.”

As my host stood, Princess Celestia *(squee! squee! squee!)* moved around the table, eyeing the model favorably. “So, this is to be Luna’s new academy?”

Apple Bloom nodded nervously, unable to speak.

“It looks lovely.”

Apple Bloom squeaked, “Thank you, Your Majesty!”

Celestia’s ears perked. “Ah, and here she comes. If you would be so kind as to let me speak first?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” my host said quickly. Celestia turned and both Apple Bloom and her uncle followed the glorious Princess’s gaze.

Princess Luna walked in between two curtains. Her dark blue colors looked striking yet starkly out-of-place in the rest of the palace. She was much smaller than Her regal older sister (or, for that matter, than the pseudo-goddesses)… almost the size of a normal pony. While Princess Celestia was resplendent, Princess Luna struck me as… cute.

The sort of cute that I would have impure thoughts about if the pony in my head wasn't already too busy bouncing around Pinkie Pie Style and letting off a barrage of squee-ing noises.

"Sister? You called for me?"

"Yes, Luna dear. I'd been thinking about that school of magic you have been proposing. And I've decided to send all your students to the moon."

Luna froze. Her mouth hung open. Then closed slowly. "You wouldn't…" I could see the gears in Her head start spinning again. "And you couldn't. Without the Elements of Harmony, you don't have anywhere near that kind of power, *dear sister.*"

What was going on here?

Apple Bloom, apparently either not quite in on the joke, or simply unable to see Luna made uncomfortable, quickly spoke up. "She means Crescent Moon Canyon."

Princess Celestia smiled but tilted Her head towards Apple Bloom with a look that suggested the regal Princess hadn't wanted the young architect to spill that quite yet.

Princess Luna shot her sister a Look then moved to the table, Her eyes going wide. "This…?" She looked up with tears in Her eyes. "This is going to be the Luna Academy for Young Unicorns? A magical school of my very own? Just like yours?"

Princess Celestia smiled and nuzzled Her younger sister. "Happy birthday, little sister."

Apple Bloom's mouth hung open until my host tapped his own with a hoof. Blushing, she waved a hoof over the model. "Princess Celestia has given…" She paused, looking up at the Princess to make sure it was okay to speak. Princess Celestia smiled with a nod and softness in her eyes. "…us Littlehorn Valley in the Crescent Moon Canyon t' build on. It's isolated, far away from any dangers…"

"Or any villages," Princess Luna noted, giving Her sister a gentler look, but a look nonetheless. "And far away from Canterlot and your own school."

Princess Celestia nodded. "I want you to have this fairly, without ponies making the comparisons they would if the schools were side-by-side, and without the students being distracted by rivalry." The Princess flicked Her gaze to Apple Bloom as she added, "And I know you were considering Ponyville, but I didn't want young colts and fillies wandering off into the Everfree Forest."

Luna rolled her eyes. "Come on, big sister. No filly is foalish enough to go wandering around that place. Have faith in my students…"

Apple Bloom was making the sort of face that suggested she really wanted to be someplace else.

"…the only thing within a day's wagon ride of Littlehorn are some zebra jungles."

"Yes," Princess Celestia nodded. "There will be friendly zebras not far away if they need assistance. And soon several of your students will have baby dragons of their own; so if anypony needs to contact you, you will only be a sneeze away."

* * *

We were airborne between Fillydelphia and Manehattan. As much as I wanted to go straight to Tenpony Tower, the warning that DJ Pon3 had sent me was at the front of my thoughts, so I had directed Calamity to take us to Junction R-7 first. If something nasty was brewing in Shattered Hoof, something that Homage thought I needed to take care of first, then I wasn't going to waste any time.

That still left me a lot of time to think. And most of that time was spent thinking about the memory orb I had found beside poor Apple Bloom's skeleton. My inner pony had taken over a day to stop dancing at having seen the Goddesses, and it was almost harder to prevent myself from reliving the memory over and over than it was fight the urge for Party-Time Mint-als. And at least with the latter I had the help of simply not carrying any to take. The cravings came without an easy way to sate them. But this… I couldn't throw away a memory orb of the Goddesses! It deserved to be enshrined.

I momentarily played with the idea of taking the Cathedral for myself, wanting to transform it into a temple to Celestia and Luna with the memory orb as a sacred relic. It was a silly daydream, and it passed. I also caught myself revisiting the notion of Luna clopping me with Her wings, only this time as a fantasy rather than a swear. I caught myself before my imagination could get too far and punished myself by banging my head repeatedly against the side of the Sky Bandit until Calamity threatened to land.

It took a while before other implications of what I had seen started to sink in.

Littlehorn. It was a name I had heard before in several contexts. But Watcher's words stood out:

The Massacre at Littlehorn broke Princess Celestia's heart. After that, nearly midway through the war, Princess Celestia decided She wasn't the right pony to lead Equestria anymore. So She stepped down, abdicated Her position to Her sister, Princess Luna.

I looked around. Velvet Remedy was lost inside the Fluttershy memory orb once more. Pyrelight, her aura merely twice her size, had cradled herself against Velvet's left shoulder and was snoring loftily. I shared the *Sky Bandit* with SteelHooves and Xenith. Calamity was ahead, pulling us.

Well, if there was any pony who would know, it was SteelHooves.

"What happened at Littlehorn?"

SteelHooves and Xenith both started at the question. They looked at each other before SteelHooves answered me simply, "Disaster."

I shivered, knowing I didn't really want to hear this. But part of me needed to. "Tell me."

"Littlehorn was a school. Unicorn fillies and colts, many of whom were too young to even have their cutie marks, lived there, being trained by some of the best of Equestria's magicians," SteelHooves started slowly. "One evening, around twilight, a little over nine years into the war, a zebra convoy rolled into Littlehorn Valley. Two dozen Zebra legionnaires and three large covered wagons. When they didn't respond to peaceful overtures, the matron of the school activated the school's defenses…"

"They didn't know your language," Xenith abruptly interrupted. "They weren't front-line soldiers. It was a refugee convoy. Mares and small zebra children just trying to get out of the killing zone!"

"I know that!" SteelHooves shot back harshly. "They realized that when the first wagon was struck and they saw the dead! But by then it was too late." He turned to me. "It was too late. The zebra convoy had assassins wearing zebra stealth cloaks…"

"They had *one.*" Xenith corrected. "A father whose family was killed in your school's surprise attack."

"They only needed one," SteelHooves growled. "The school was full of *children.* And the zebras set off a gas bomb inside. It was Canterlot in miniature. The striped bastards *killed… every… pony* in Littlehorn!"

I felt myself crying. "Okay… please… I don't want to hear anymore."

* * *

They weren't paying attention to me.

But then, I wasn't being very assertive. I was still numb with heartache. Littlehorn had been the turning point of the war, and the pony in my mind was realizing with tearful slowness how Littlehorn had rippled out to destroy everypony it touched. I began to understand. The architect Apple Bloom's sense of guilt and how it steered her choices. And that would have been nothing compared to the guilt and sorrow of then-Princess Celestia who had Herself chosen the location. Or the effects on Princess Luna, whose beloved students were the ones slaughtered to the last.

"It was after Littlehorn that the damn zebras went totally manticore-shit. Every fight became one to annihilation of one side or the other. We struck one wagon, and yes it was a mistake. They massacred hundreds of small children and then went completely insane over it!"

"That had nothing to do with Littlehorn," Xenith said solemnly. "The war had changed. It wasn't about coal or gemstones anymore…"

Coal and gemstones? But then that made a lot of sense. Zebras weren't like unicorns. They couldn't cast spells or use magic directly. They had to brew it into potions, infuse into fetishes or otherwise bind it into objects to get their magic to work. And with the possible exception of Soul Jars, gemstones were the ultimate receptacle for magical enchantment. Any society advancing through arcane sciences would require trains full of gems. That was easy for ponies. We had lands rich with them. Rock farms for growing them. But if the zebra lands didn't have gems… but they did have coal…

I was pulled out of my mental distraction when SteelHooves advanced on Xenith. "Then you admit your whole damn species had a fucking mental break!"

"Not mine," Xenith insisted. "We saw that you ponies had fallen under the influence of the stars. No quarter could be given and no mercy expected from a nation under the sway of cosmic evil."

"What?!?" I mouthed what SteelHooves screamed.

"Did you or did you not choose to follow the champion of the evil stars, Nightmare Moon?"

"What? Are you… *what!?"* SteelHooves turned stomping and pacing until Calamity once again threatened to land the Sky Bandit and give us all a talking to.

"Wait…" I said slowly. "Are you saying… that the reason the war got so bad… is because zebras couldn't tell the difference between Princess Luna and Nightmare Moon?"

From a struggle over resources to holy war in ten seconds flat.

"They're not the same fucking pony!" SteelHooves screamed at Xenith, although more now because he couldn't scream at the zebras of the past. "We… we weren't following *Nightmare Moon* any more than Princess Celestia imprisoned *Luna* on the fucking moon for a thousand years." The Steel Ranger was shaking. "They. Are. Not. The. Same!"

Velvet Remedy had come out of the Fluttershy orb and was looking on in confusion. SteelHooves turned to the two of us and barked, "Tell her."

"They are not the same," I said firmly. Then took note of the silence beside me. I turned a look towards Velvet Remedy.

"Honestly," she whispered, "I was never really clear on that myself. I always figured it was some kind of psychotic break."

"Arrugh!" SteelHooves sounded murderous. Which, considering this was SteelHooves, actually scared me. "Psychotic breaks don't come with physical transformations!"

I nodded in firm agreement. …Unless you were Pinkie Pie's hair, I thought, remembering that weird change at the end of her argument with Twilight Sparkle.

SteelHooves visibly shook. His voice changed from an angered yell to a low, even blade. "Then there was never any real chance of diplomacy after that, was there?" I could tell that behind his visor, his eyes were locked on Xenith's. "The invitation to Shattered Hoof Ridge for peace talks… there were never going to be any peace talks, were there?"

Xenith's ears flattened. She tried to be reasonable, apparently realizing that this was no longer even an unfriendly argument. "I wasn't there. Please remember that these were other people, zebras and ponies alike. Not us."

"Answer the question."

Xenith looked away. "From the tales I have been told," she sighed sadly, "Peace was what was hoped, but there could only be peace if Nightmare Moon was removed. Unfortunately, the ponies sent the wrong Princess to Shattered Hoof Ridge."

The night turned infinitely colder. I waited, my nerves on edge, for what SteelHooves would do.

With a final growl, SteelHooves removed himself to the farthest end of the *Sky Bandit* and crouched down, pretending to sleep. Which I knew he didn't, but I thankfully played along.

"Y'all okay back there now?" Calamity called back.

My answer echoed SteelHooves' answer to Knight Poppyseed.

"No."

* * *

We picked up the signal near within an hour of setting down at Junction R-7. It wasn't from Shattered Hoof.

> *"…mated distress call from Stable-Tec Stable Two. Message begins:"*

The mechanized voice gave way to one I had written off ever hearing again. The voice of our Overmare.

> *"Littlepip, Velvet Remedy, if either of you can hear this… I pray you're still alive, still out there to hear this. Please, if you… or if any friendly pony can hear this… Stable Two is under attack. We don't know who they are or where they came from.*

But they have somehow opened the front door and they are killing everypony inside! I've evacuated all the survivors into the Security and Overmare's wing. But now that we are cut off from the orchard, we are running out of food. The invaders seem content to wait us out. If you can hear this, please save us."

My blood turned to ice. I analyzed the signal. The broadcast was being piped through the same transmitter that the father of a dying colt had once tapped into from the cistern under the Big Macintosh Memorial. The mechanical voice returned.

Home!

"Message repeats. This is an automated distress call from Stable-Tec Stable Two. Message begins…"

Oh Goddesses…

"C-Calamity, turn now! We have to get to Stable Two! Fast!"

"Uh… Li'lpip? Ah'm 'bout t' collapse here. What's the…"

I pulled out my earbloom and played the message aloud. Within ten words, Calamity was already banking and pulling us onto our new heading.

"No…" SteelHooves whispered. "Damn them, no!"

I swiveled towards my Steel Ranger friend. "No what?" And then I realized what crusade Elder Blueberry Sabre had rushed off to the moment I was out of the way.

"I'm sorry, Littlepip. I did everything I could to make them believe taking Stable Two was a mistake. I have been for decades. But after you two showed up, and they realized there was still a functional Stable down there…"

"This. Was. Your. Mission!?" I strode forward, my glare alone almost strong enough to disintegrate the earth pony ghoul. "Assess if Stable Two could be safely taken?!"

He cringed back from me. "I even tried giving them Stable Twenty-Nine instead."

I rocked on my hooves, my mind teetering on the edge of a dark chasm as I struggled to remember if, in my own hack of Stable Twenty-Nine's entrance, I might have left clues that the tech-savvy agents of the Ministry of Wartime Technology could have used to figure their way through my own Stable's door.

Velvet Remedy wrapped a hoof about me, holding me back. "If the Steel Rangers are assaulting our home," she said with steel in her voice, "We might need him."

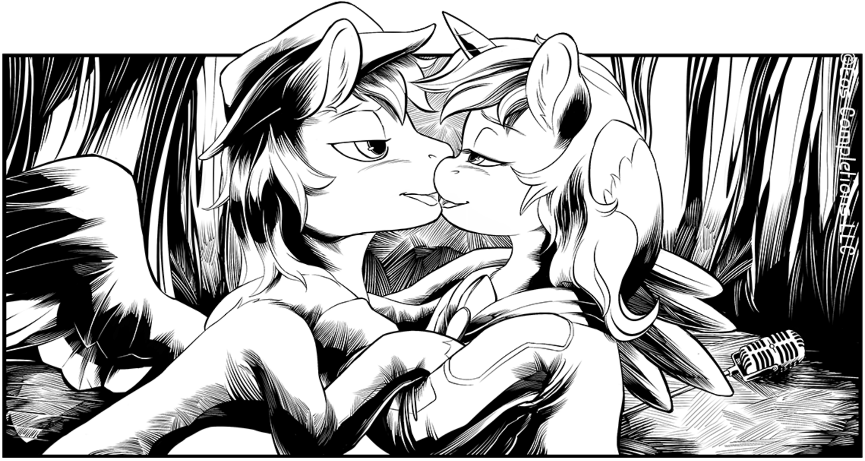
"Or maybe it's best we just drop ya off here," Calamity called back, fixing SteelHooves with an even stare. "Cuz Ah'm headin' t' Stable Two, an' when Ah get there, Ah'm plannin' t' kill me a whole lot of Steel Rangers!"

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk: Bone-Strengthening Brew – With this perk, your limbs only receive 50% of the damage they normally would. (Note: Bone-Strengthening Brew and the cybernetic implant perk Adamantium Bone Lacing are mutually exclusive.)

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The Hour of the Wolf



"This… is Steel Rangers level murder here."

Rage.

Burning, explosive rage. In the moment I realized that the Steel Rangers had invaded my home, were *killing* the ponies inside, I saw red like I never had before. My nerves were hot, electric. I wanted to strike out. To slaughter the fuckers. To rip them apart from the inside out, and keep stomping until they were nothing but paste under my hooves.

But my enemies, the murderers who were defiling my home, were not here. It would be hours, even at Calamity's best speed, before we would make it to Stable Two. I wanted to hurt somepony *now.* My whole body and mind and soul screamed for justice and retribution… and if I couldn't have that, at least somepony to buck. But the only ponies around were my friends.

So I stood there and raged in silence.

And they were wise enough not to interfere.

* * *

"Do you think I wanted this?" SteelHooves snapped, pacing through the interior of the *Sky Bandit.* "Stable Two was home to Applejack's family. If anyone in the Apple family still lives, they live in there…"

"Ah ain't sayin' ya wanted this," Calamity shot back. "An' Ah ain't sayin' ya didn't do yer darned best t' stop it. Ah'm jus' sayin' yer best weren't good enough." The rust-colored pegasus was pouring on the speed despite being at the point of exhaustion. "An' now it's muh turn."

Xenith watched the argument, for once not being the focus of the shouting. She turned to Velvet Remedy, eyes large. “This… is your home? You and the little one? Why do the Steel Rangers attack it?”

Velvet Remedy shook her head. Each blink sent fresh tears down her charcoal cheeks. The wind whipped at her color-streaked white mane. “Resources. Nothing more. All they see is a functional Stable. In the very least, the water talisman is priceless. The apple orchard nearly so.” She closed her eyes, shuddering with a soft sob. “At most, they want it as a base.”

My rage was beginning to ebb, the fire and fury unable to maintain itself without a direction to strike. I could feel numbness, sorrow and horror lurking behind it, ready to overwhelm me once the inferno of anger burnt itself out.

“You can’t just prance in and start killing Rangers,” SteelHooves stomped.

“Ah don’t see why not. Far as Ah can see, they’re nothin’ more’n a gang o’ high-tech raiders preyin’ on the innocent.” Calamity kicked at his battle saddle, changing the ammo. “Ponies like that need t’ die, an’ Ah aim t’ kill ’em. It’s muh policy.”

SteelHooves turned to Velvet Remedy. “You talk to him.”

“And say what?” Velvet’s voice was hard as steel.

SteelHooves grunted. “That it’s suicide, for a start.” He looked at us. “Do you ponies really think you can take on a few squads’ worth of Knights and Paladins in magical armor?”

The ghoul’s words hit home. The size of this was too much. Who knew how many Steel Rangers were down there, each with weapons and armor and combat experience far in excess of our own. How was I going to save Stable Two? How could I fight that?

I began to remember each and every pony I had grown up with. My teachers, my peers, each pony at my first and only slumber party… I felt myself being crushed under the weight of this responsibility. I couldn’t breathe.

“Y’all gonna be surprised jus’ what we c’n do.”

The armor-encased ghoul rounded on the pegasus. “I’m on your side here.”

“Are you?” I asked, finally breaking my silence.

The others all turned a collective gaze on SteelHooves. The Steel Ranger, the eternally obedient soldier buck, had been backed into a corner. Forced to choose between his loyalty to us and his Oath to them.

If that was all it was, then I knew we would lose. But I had seen into his head, into his memories. SteelHooves’ Oath wasn’t to the Ministry of Wartime Technology. It was to *her.* Applejack. And when it had come to defending her, there had never been a moral he considered sacred enough to let it stand in his way. If that still held true, then we stood a chance.

SteelHooves didn’t answer. That was not a good sign. But such a decision was hard enough without being further forced. I didn’t dare push him. I needed him. I needed all of them.

“Well, that’s jus’ perfect,” Calamity groused. “C’n ya ’least promise not t’ shoot us in the back when ya do make up yer mind?”

I wanted to tell the pegasus to shut up. I knew Calamity had a right to say that. And right now, *he* was the one going beyond the pale just to get us there. But if I had any chance of not letting Stable Two down… not letting every pony I had ever known *die*… I needed my friends to pull together. We needed to be strong. Instead, I was drowning.

And all about me, they were splintering apart under the tension.

Velvet Remedy nickered deprecatingly, "Well, if we're making promises, maybe Littlepip can promise that, if we win, she won't adopt any of them?"

I stumbled, feeling sucker-punched even as I was fighting to breathe.

"Oh come on, Littlepip," Velvet said, rolling her eyes. "It has not passed my notice that you have a habit of collecting ponies (and now zebras) who have nearly killed you." She shook her mane. "I'll admit, I sometimes wonder if there isn't a part of you that is doing it to get back at me."

"What?!" What the hell?

"Well, aside from just being the one who patches you up every time you get yourself hurt, I'm also the one who is at least a little responsible for you getting trapped out here to begin with," Velvet pointed out. Her normally beautiful voice sounded frayed.

I could tell this was the return of nasty, bitchy Remedy who dealt with the horrors around her by thinking poorly of her friends. I had really hoped we'd left this Remedy behind. But there she was, buried under the surface, just waiting for enough stress on the fault-lines of Velvet's personality to set her free.

"Are you sure there isn't a part of you that isn't trying to punish me by surrounding us with reminders of all the times you've nearly died out here?"

"Whoa nelly!" Calamity looked back. "Is that how ya think o' me?"

Oh Goddesses. Please, I don't know if I can do this even with you. I *can't* do this *without* you.

"Stop it! All of you!" I stomped with all hooves, shaking. "We can't tear apart now. Our home… my home… they need us! What good are we to them if we're already bleeding to death when we get there?"

"Bits and shrews," Calamity exclaimed. "Yer right, Li'lpip. Ah'm sorry."

"As am I," Velvet Remedy said. The good Velvet was, at least for now, back again. "I… don't know what came over me. I guess I'm just not dealing with this well."

"So," SteelHooves inquired, his voice calm as if the arguments had never happened, "Do you have a plan?"

I felt the wind blow through my coat and mane, ruffling my utility barding under saddlepacks and armor plating. I looked at each of them, suddenly feeling very small. My eyes fell to Velvet. "This… can't be just my decision. Velvet, this was your home too." My eyes pleaded with her. Silently, I begged her to help me.

Please, Velvet, please don't let this be all on me. This is *home.* These are our ponies. I can't have whether they live or die be all on me. I just can't.

Velvet returned my gaze. In her teary eyes, I saw a kindness that told me she understood, and that she would take as much of this burden from me as she could.

Velvet turned to the others. "SteelHooves is right. I doubt we have the firepower to take on the Steel Rangers. And even if we do, we couldn't hope to without losses. So we look for an avenue of diplomacy first."

I nodded, weeping thankfully. Suddenly, I could breathe again.

* * *

There was an odd orange glow on the horizon, like an angry dawn was approaching. But the glow was from the wrong direction, and there were many hours before the first hints of daylight. The sun and the moon had gone wild, raising and setting by their own whims, but even those whims seemed to have a clockwork precision.

"What are we looking at?"

"Fires," Calamity answered. "That out there's the Everfree Forest. Looks like Red Eye's got the whole backside ablaze."

Xenith queried, "Do you think Red Eye's troops might be near Stable Two?"

"Naw, not a chance," Calamity answered. "Those fires are over a day away. Wouldn't make no sense for 'em t' be anywhere near Ponyville."

I leaned against Velvet Remedy, using her soft body for physical support, drinking in the scent of her to calm myself. I was still trembling, trying to steady myself, fighting off waves of alternating rage and bleak sorrow. The stress was winding me up until I felt I would explode. Or shatter.

Velvet Remedy was allowing herself the distraction of staring at the fire-lit cloud cover in the distance. "I remember when I first left Stable Two. The cloud cover had breaks in it. I could see real sunlight. It was the most beautiful, warming thing. More beautiful than anything I had ever experienced in my life. I thought… if there is something as wonderful as this out here, then the Outside can't be bad." She chuckled sadly. "Haven't seen the sun like that again. Sometimes I wonder if that isn't why this world feels so dark and hopeless."

I remembered a similar break in the clouds, pouring the soft light of Luna's moon down upon Monterey Jack and me as we faced off on the Ponyville bridge. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Ayep," Calamity replied, missing the art and soul of Velvet's comment, "The Everfree Forest don't work properly. Pegasi have always had a tough time keeping the cloud cover over that place. It's like the clouds *want* to move. All on their own. Cloud curtain in the areas right up against it c'n get mighty patchwork-y sometimes."

SteelHooves was staring in the other direction, his visor gazing out into the darkness. Finally, he admitted with a low rumble, "I don't understand why Elder Blueberry Sabre is doing this."

I felt Velvet Remedy had covered that question fairly well earlier.

SteelHooves let out a breath. "This is far outside her territory. Elder Blueberry Sabre is the Elder for the Fillydelphia contingent of the Steel Rangers. Stable Two technically falls under the purview of *my* Elder and the Manehattan contingent."

Oh. "They can't keep Fillydelphia," I offered, feeling a fresh surge of fury as my thoughts touched on what must be happening every minute now. "Red Eye keeps growing stronger. The Steel Rangers' position there is stagnant, if not weakening. I think Velvet's right about them needing a new base."

The ghoul nodded inside his armor. "Still, it should fall to Elder Cottage Cheese to take Stable Two. For him not to be there would be… a considerable divergence from protocol. And to have two Elders in the same place would be strategically unwise."

In front, Calamity whinnied, letting all legs hang in the air and sticking out his tongue with an expression of disgust. "Seriously now? Yer commandin' officer's name is Cottage Cheese? Did his folks hate 'im or sumthin'?"

SteelHooves chuckled despite our dark situation. "He does prefer to simply be called

Cottage."

"I like cottage cheese," I said in a very small voice.

"Hey, maybe yer Cottage Cheese Elder is pullin' the same thing on Blueberry Sabre that she pulled on Li'lpip," Calamity suggested. "Sendin' her inta a situation that he feels is a giant deathtrap. After all, don't he believe a buncha rubbish 'bout the Ministry o' Awesome havin' black ops Stables and nonsense like that?"

"Well, maybe not complete nonsense," I muttered under my breath.

"Whatcha mean by that, Li'lpip?" Crap. Calamity heard me.

"Well, I mean that I saw Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie setting up Zecora to be a double agent for Equestria. Rainbow Dash said Zecora trained under the Ministry of Awesome's best trainers… which made it sound like MAw did that sort of thing a lot."

I was met by stunned silence. From everyone. Except Pyrelight, who cooed curiously at Velvet.

I had been slightly worried that mentioning I had a memory orb of Rainbow Dash might lead to Calamity demanding a recollector. I didn't want my Dashite friend losing himself in the orb the way Velvet often did with the Fluttershy orb.

"Zecora" Xenith asked, her exotic voice slow and cautious. "Do you mean Zecora of Zecora's Hut in the Everfree Forest?"

Whoops. "Um… Yes. Turns out she was a friend of the Ministry Mares. And chose to…" Was it really a good idea to tell Xenith that Zecora had gone undercover to betray the zebras?

"Zecora was a traitor!" SteelHooves growled dangerously. "She was selling weapons technology to the zebras." He took a step towards me. "She tried to give them the damn gun that would punch through Steel Ranger armor!"

oh boy… "Uh, no. Not really. That was part of her… cover?"

"No. That is not true," SteelHooves insisted adamantly.

"Fluttershy knew a zebra?" Velvet Remedy's voice asked. At least that revelation, thank the Goddesses, probably didn't lead down dangerous paths.

"Uh, Li'lpip… maybe ya oughta be explainin' some o' these memory orbs y'all been lookin' at?"

I groaned. Even staying away from personal memories, like SteelHooves' memory orbs, or dangerous ones like anything involving Fluttershy and the damn megaspells, this would take a while. But part of me was thankful for the distraction. We still had a few hours to go.

* * *

"Burnin' hoof means *what!?*"

"That's what she said!" I was still as overwhelmed by that as when I lived it.

"I'm still wrapping my mind around Fluttershy hitting on Applejack," Velvet chuckled with amusement. "Even if it was for a good cause." Her eyes twinkled as she looked at me. I hung my head. I had some torment coming my way after the barn door slip-up, and I suddenly felt sure Velvet Remedy was drawing a whole new level of inspiration from the yellow pegasus.

As if to confirm my suspicion, Xenith leaned close and intoned, "You're doomed."

SteelHooves had remained abnormally silent, even for the taciturn ghoul, ever since I explained that first memory. At first, I thought that the revelation about Zecora had affected him, or perhaps the confirmation of his theories about the Ministry of Awesome. With time, I grew to suspect that neither was the case. Rather, I suspected that while we were distracting ourselves from the conflict that awaited us at Stable Two, SteelHooves was plunged deep into his own internal turmoil, and was working through it as best he could before the moment of choice arrived. In a way, he was stronger than we were. Or, at least, than I was.

The sound of rapid-fire pops floated up to us on the wind.

We were approaching Ponyville. Sweet Apple Acres was still a good bit away; but in the stillness of the wasteland, the night air carried the sounds of battle great distances.

Velvet Remedy whimpered. “That’s a lot of gunfire.”

“Grenade machine guns,” SteelHooves noted. “Like mine. Several of them.”

I felt myself trembling as my imagination insisted on conjuring images of what might be happening. They wouldn’t be using that sort of weaponry inside the Stable, would they? And, if not, what were they doing? Suddenly, I pictured all the ponies of Stable Two marched out into the nearest field of poisoned apple trees, lined up… and fired upon with grenades just for the cruel pleasure of seeing their bodies torn violently apart.

I let out a low moan, tears in my eyes. I tried to banish the image. Surely, even these monsters wouldn’t be so vicious, so cruel. These were SteelHooves’ brethren, not raiders, right?

“Monsters!” Velvet Remedy hissed next to me.

“Ah think yer right,” Calamity agreed, making me cringe. Please no. This can’t be what I’m thinking. It just can’t!

“Red Eye’s fires are drivin’ a whole mess o’ things towards Ponyville. Sounds t’ me like a few ’ave wandered their way up t’ Sweet Apple Acres.”

⁂

It was the deepest part of the night. There was a name for it that I couldn’t remember – that mystical black hour where all is darkest and you can’t sleep, when the weight of all your sorrows and bad decisions come weighing on you most heavily, and when the monsters scratch just outside your door.

Velvet Remedy got up and started rummaging through the supplies we had stored in the back of the *Sky Bandit* – all those things we were keeping for trade, or had intended to stash back at Junction R-7, but didn’t want to burden our saddlebags with. Including every weapon Calamity had been able to strip from the ponies Stern had brought with her to attack my friends at the Fillydelphia Tower.

I began to reload my weapons. My choices were limited. Little Macintosh was powerful enough to possibly punch through a Steel Ranger’s armor if I could hit a weak spot, and I had a single clip of armor-piercing bullets for my sniper rifle. Only my zebra rifle had sufficient armor-piercing rounds, thanks both to the convoy Calamity and I had looted outside of Fillydelphia and some additional ammo he had liberated from Stern’s slavers.

I floated the zebra rifle in front of me, looking at it. My rage was beginning to boil again, pushing away the numbing pain. For once tonight, I put up a wall against it, trying to remain at least partially rational, not let this overwhelm me. Did I really want to use the zebra rifle against the Steel Rangers? On one hoof, these were my enemies and they deserved what they were going to get. And the rifle was the best weapon I had for putting a mess of them down. But the zebra rifle's enchantment… the bullets would do more than just punch through the armor. I'd seen what happens to a pony who is set on fire inside a suit of armor, and the memory still horrified me. Was I really ready to go Spike on these ponies?

"What is that you are wearing?" Xenith gasped.

Velvet Remedy responded gracefully, "We are going into battle against truly dangerous opponents. How foolish would I be to not go in wearing armor? And this is the best armor I possess."

Velvet Remedy was wearing the zebra legionnaire armor.

"Unless, of course, you wished to wear it," Velvet said kindly. "I think you have more claim to it than I do."

Xenith considered that a moment, glancing towards SteelHooves. "No. Equestria is my home."

"Oh horseapples," Calamity muttered to himself, wincing. Then, speaking up, "uh… Velvet? Li'lpip? Ah've got a request. An' feel free t' say no. Ah know it's askin' a lot Ah have no right t' ask." He paused a moment, then pushed forward. "But if we're gearin' up for a big fight, then Ah've got some stuff stashed not far from here that might help. Only add 'bout fifteen minutes t' our flight, Ah promise. But that's fifteen minutes them Rangers could be killin' yer kin."

I was already feeling each second drop away with blood. Fifteen minutes more, when we'd already taken so long… I couldn't bear the thought. "No," I said firmly. "We can't give them a minute more, much less fifteen." I took a deep breath, "But if you think it will help, then drop us off at the Stable door and go. You can meet us back…"

"No," Velvet interrupted. "Splitting up is a bad idea. I don't want Calamity wandering the Stable alone trying to find us. We all go in together." She was right. My suggestion was a bad one.

"Calamity, go ahead," she continued. "We've taken hours to get here. If fifteen minutes more is going to make that much difference, we've already lost. I know you wouldn't even bring this up if you didn't really think it would help. And anything that helps us get through this alive is worth fifteen minutes."

Calamity extended his wings, changing course.

Sweet Apple Acres was now looming into view – the rolling hills of feeble trees bearing poisoned fruit, the old barn still standing, surprisingly intact.

You won't be able to use the barn until next spring.

I suddenly imagined that Apple Bloom had torn the original barn down while they excavated for Stable Two. Then rebuilt it afterwards. When Stable-Tec builds something, they build it to last.

I could see sparkling lights in the air, like part of the night sky had descended through the clouds and landed in the middle of the farm. A swarm of evil stars. The pin-point lights of muzzle flashes danced across the ground all around it.

Xenith drew a sharp breath. "No!"

"What is it?"

The zebra's eyes were wide with horror. "Star-spawn!"

What the Steel Rangers fought was a horror out of zebra legends – a creature from beyond the moon, unleashed upon the world eons ago as a 'gift' from the stars.

The creature was massive and completely invisible save for the surging, living constellations of light that seemed to float around and inside of it. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, but while the compass burst with lights for the ponies on the ground, most of which were a hostile red, my PipBuck couldn't lock onto the entity they were fighting at all. As far as it was concerned, nothing was there.

Gunfire from the embattled Steel Rangers poured into thin air, and the starry air attacked back, crushing them or sending them flying. Rockets exploded, bathing parts of the creature in fire long enough to get glimpses of its shape – I felt only mildly reassured that its structure seemed at least vaguely pony-like, with a head, body and four legs. An eldritch roar blasted across the cloud-shrouded heavens. It sounded like the cosmos screaming in rage.

My first instinct was to try to help. I wanted to run to their aid. It actually took a moment for me to remember that the ponies down there were our enemies. But not all of them, at least according to my E.F.S., and wasn't that enough?

"We've got to help them," SteelHooves insisted, voicing my own thoughts. "You wanted diplomacy? This would be the first step."

"You cannot hope to fight a Star-spawn!" Xenith gasped. "What manner of fool are you? All you can hope do is run and hide."

"Have you met us?" SteelHooves asked. And with those words, I knew he had made his choice.

Detour abandoned, Calamity winged towards the barn and flew us into the storm.

* * *

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

SteelHooves stood on top of the *Sky Bandit,* his grenade machine-gun tearing at the virtually invisible monster as Calamity circled us around again. The pegasus buck was doing his best to get us as close as possible while keeping us outside the Star-spawn's striking range – not an easy trick being unable to properly see the creature.

The Steel Rangers on the ground had been nearly decimated. There were at least a dozen corpses in crushed and mangled armor. Nowhere near the forces that SteelHooves estimated had been sent to take the Stable. I could make out three remaining from the dim light of their E.F.S. visors and the brilliant flashes from their weapons. One fired off a pair of missiles. They exploded against the transparent hide of the monster.

The Star-spawn retaliated, an unseen appendage connecting with the armored knight with a sickening crunch.

The pony flew through the air towards us. "Yeeeow!" Calamity cried, dodging. I could see the pony was dead as it arced past us, internal organs pulverized inside gruesomely dented armor.

Pyrelight shot out past us, strafing the creature with balefire, washing part of its back with flames that quickly died away.

I focused, trying to wrap the entire entity in a magical field. I had no intention of moving it, but as the magical aura spread around it, the creature became clearly outlined. It was far bigger than I thought. But at least now we could properly dodge the alien behemoth.

Velvet Remedy cast her anesthetic spell at the cosmic beast. Her magic hit it square in the head. The creature stumbled, fazed for only a few seconds, then let out another unearthy roar.

"Dang it, she's just too big! We ain't doin' more'n bee stings t' her!"

"I told you," Xenith warned, cringing. "You can't slay a Star-spawn. You best be thankful this one is but a baby. A full-grown one would have devoured all of Ponyville without even noticing."

"That's just a baby?" I asked in shock as the monster stepped backward, colliding through the barn. The last building standing on Sweet Apple Acres, the barn which had weathered apocalypse and two-hundred years of the wasteland, came crashing down. I felt a pang as I watched the barn I'd witness Applejack and her friends together in during sunnier, happier times be obliterated by the uncaring misstep of the Star-spawn.

"Littlepip, keep that glow up!" SteelHooves ordered as my telekinetic field began to slip. "Calamity, bring us around in front of the thing and hover. Velvet, have that spell ready again when I say."

"Ah sure hope ya know what yer doin'," Calamity said as he brought the *Sky Bandit* directly in front of the monster's snout.

"Now, Velvet."

Velvet Remedy focused, unleashing a small bolt of magic that splashed against the head of the creature. Again, for just a moment, it was stunned by the same magic that would completely paralyze a hellhound for nearly an hour.

A streak of smoke shot out from the top of the *Sky Bandit* above me as SteelHooves fired off a single rocket. I watched as the missile shot through the glow of my magic and beyond where the hide of the creature should be, lodging *inside* the monster's transparent, star-moted head.

The Star-spawn let out a howl that tore us from the sky. Calamity fought to regain control before we smashed into the poisoned orchard below. A moment later, the missile detonated, it's explosion accompanied by a gut-wrenching, wet, splorchy sound.

We hit the ground seconds before the Star-spawn's body did. I bounced around inside, banging heavily against the benches and metal walls, bursts of pain blossoming throughout my body. The sky bandit rolled, crashing through several trees before coming to a stop. Calamity hung limp from the harness. Velvet Remedy lay amongst the scattered supplies, moaning. I could not see where SteelHooves had been thrown to. Or Xenith.

My PipBuck was clicking madly. I felt the warm stickiness matting my mane. I reached up with a hoof. My lightest touch brought dizzying pain and shooting lights. And then darkness.

* * *

The bright spotlight from SteelHooves' helmet found me.

Xenith trotted beside him, looking annoyingly unhurt. She had, I would learn, jumped out a window as we crashed, landing in a controlled roll that left her unmangled save for her mane.

"Is… everypony okay?" I asked weakly.

"Never better," SteelHooves said. The way my PipBuck was clicking, he may have been telling the truth.

"You flew through a tree," Xenith countered. "Your back should be broken."

"Hard to keep down a Canterlot ghoul," SteelHooves replied. I got the feeling he enjoyed the way she gasped in near horror, stepping quickly away from him.

"That's us," I smiled weakly. "Full of surprises." I looked to SteelHooves, "How did you kill the Star-spawn? That was amazing!"

"I'd seen an Ursa once before, back in the war," SteelHooves replied. "From your outline, looked like the monsters they turned into weren't too physically different. Just a bit nastier and a lot harder to see. So I fired where an Ursa's eye socket ought to have been and hoped for the best."

Calamity had come to with a weary groan. Finding himself hanging upside down in the *Sky Bandit's* harness, he waved his forelegs, as if hoping to flip the entire passenger wagon back over. It wasn't going to work.

"Here, let me help," I called out and magically unhooked the harness. Calamity fell onto his back with a thump.

"Oof!"

Velvet Remedy hobbled out of the passenger wagon, dragging our medical supplies with her. I realized that we had probably scattered our belongings across a hundred yards of irradiated cropland. But that would be a task for morning. First we had to get through the night. At least I hadn't lost my weapons.

"Everypony (and zebra) gather around," Velvet said politely, dropping her saddleboxes to the ground. "Your medical pony is going to patch you all up before we proceed further, while simultaneously managing to not take it as a bad omen that she's having to heal your wounds before you even get inside the Stable door."

"Hold up right there, ponies!" a voice ordered from the darkness. Two helmet spotlights pinned the group of us.

The two Steel Rangers who had survived the Star-spawn battle were moving towards us, weapons pointed, the light from their E.F.S. visors letting me know they had their targeting spells locked onto us.

"Oh wow," came a sweet mare's voice from the second suit. "Look, it's Elder SteelHooves."

"Star Paladin SteelHooves," the other corrected swiftly. "And keep your weapon locked on him, Knight Strawberry Lemonade." That one turned to face our ghoul companion. "We have specific orders to send you on your way. You will not interfere with this operation."

"That was awesome, SteelHooves, sir!" the younger knight gushed, turning off her E.F.S. "How'd you kill that thing?"

"Knight Lemonade!" The older Steel Ranger turned with a growl. "You will bring your E.F.S. back up and lock it onto your targets."

"Do you even realize which Stable you are attacking?" SteelHooves asked evenly. "This is Stable Two, the Stable built to preserve the Apple family and the ponies of Ponyville. This is the Apple family's farm. That barn had been the barn that the Mare of the Ministry of Wartime Technology, Applejack herself, had grown up in. That Stable holds her kin. You are attacking the family of the Ministry Mare of Wartime Technology. It is you who should leave. In utter shame."

"We have our orders. As do you."

"You are not my commanding officer, Paladin. Nor is Elder Blueberry Sabre." SteelHooves stood his ground. "And even if you were, these orders are wrong. This operation is a disgrace. And any pony involved in it does not deserve the title of Steel Ranger."

"The orders I'm giving you come from Elder Cottage Cheese himself. You are to leave at once, and take your tribal friends with you." The paladin turned to the knight once. "And you, bring up your Eyes-Forward Sparkle and lock on target. That is an order."

"Sir?" Knight Strawberry Lemonade faltered, "Eld… Star Paladin SteelHooves is right. This operation is wrong."

The paladin turned to face the knight, a back-mounted light machine gun swiveling to lock on her now. "You will bring up your Sparkle and lock on target or you will be facing a court marshal for disloyalty before the sun next sets!" the paladin growled. "Do I make my-"

Blam!

The paladin fell, twin bullet holes forming black zeroes on his armored helmet.

Knight Strawberry Lemonade backed up in shock. The rest of us turned to Calamity.

"What? Ah gave diplomacy a chance. He obviously wasn't 'bout t' join the good guys."

⁂

Velvet Remedy's horn glowed softly as she did her best to heal the gash on the back of my head without binding my whole face with bandages. Fortunately, she said it looked and felt far worse than it actually was.

"Elder Cottage Cheese is dying," Knight Strawberry Lemonade said, filling SteelHooves in as best she could. "I mean, I know he's been dying forever. But just this last month, not even the medical bed seems to be helping anymore. He's focused on taking Stable Twenty-Nine before he dies. That's where he is, with Star Paladin Crossroads. He invited Elder Blueberry Sabre to lead the acquisition of Stable Two, along with Star Paladin Nova Rage."

"Of course he did," SteelHooves commented. "Star Paladin Crossroads had pushed for me to become an Elder. She has the same sentiments that I do. Cottage must have known there was no way Cross would agree to the taking of Stable Two." He stomped. "Star Paladin Nova Rage, on the other hoof, is a M.W.T. traditionalist just like Elder Blueberry Sabre."

Calamity wiggled his left wing. It had suffered injury in the crash and now Velvet had it mummified in bandages. "Reckon this Cottage feller wants the Crusader in Stable Twenty-Nine? Live forever inside a machine?"

"But that's insane," I asserted. "The Crusader can take an imprint, a copy of a pony's mind, but it's not like the pony actually becomes part of the machine. Cottage Cheese would still be just as dead when he died."

"Unless," Velvet Remedy suggested, "He thought he could really put himself into it, mind and soul." It took me a moment to realize what she was thinking: a soul jar. Blackwing's Talon group had been hunting for information on The Black Book for somepony. Now I suspected I knew who. If a soul jar could be made out of anything, why not a Crusader? I suddenly imagined the Elder who ordered the attack on my home living forever in an indestructible computer. There was no way I could let that happen! He didn't get eternal life as a reward for this murder.

SteelHooves continued to speak to Knight Strawberry Lemonade. In the end, she told him, "Look, I believe you're right. And I'm willing to stand aside. But I can't follow you in. I can't attack other Rangers." Her visor turned towards Calamity, "Or cooperate with tribals who do."

SteelHooves nodded, putting an armored hoof on her shoulder. "I respect your decision. You are doing the right thing."

He turned to us. "Are we ready?"

I stood, floating the zebra rifle to my right and Little Macintosh to my left. From what the knight had told us, Elder Blueberry Sabre had left a fifth of their force guarding the way in, a precaution against us as much as the horrors slowly emptying into Ponyville from the Everfree Forest. Truth was, I was not ready. But every moment we spent talking and healing was one more for the four dozen Steel Rangers inside to tear their way into the Security and Overmare's wing and slaughter everypony they hadn't killed in their initial strike. They couldn't wait for me to be ready.

"We go."

⁂

Calamity brought up the rear. His sharpshooting would be critical should we be flanked. I kept glancing back at him, watching his reactions as we passed through the tunnel beyond the apple cellar. It was not like the sanitized little tour he had seen in Stable-Tec Headquarters.

"This is Velvet Remedy's home," he muttered. "Li'lpip's home." I'm pretty sure he didn't know I could hear him. Before the Pinkie Pie statuette, I probably wouldn't have been able to.

"Ah gotta be strong fer them. Not go crazy. Ah can't jus' charge in an' kill every armored bitch Ah see. Ah need t' be strong. Need t' watch fer them. Need t' protect 'em. Ah c'n do this."

The skeletons which littered the floor had been crushed and broken, trampled by an army of metal hooves. I felt a twisted sickness welling up within the reservoir of rage that was filling my head. Nopony knew who they were, but they deserved better than this. I felt part of my anger turn in on myself. Why had I not returned to bury them? They died at the door to my Stable.

But then, the Equestrian Wasteland was filled with skeletons. I hadn't treated any of the others any better. Not even the skeletons of Apple Bloom or Pinkie Pie. But at least I hadn't defiled them. I hadn't smashed them under hoof without even caring.

The door to Stable Two was wide open.

Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves were our diplomats, so they were in the lead. I wanted our Steel Ranger to have a shot at wooing any other Rangers before we had to shoot. So Velvet was the first to step back into the place that had once been our home. She stopped with a painful gasp. I galloped up to meet her.

The entrance room was as grey as the maintenance areas of Stable Two had always been, but now there was a cacophony of color splashed all over it. The pretty colors of pastel-coated ponies lay in pools and sprays of darkening crimson.

The Overmare had sent half a dozen ponies to greet whomever was coming in. Only two of them, Stable security guards, were armed. The others had come bearing only hopes of friendship. Scattered near the open muzzle of a magenta-coated young mare was a bouquet of flowers, a welcoming gift. The white flower petals were stained red. And the Steel Rangers had gunned them down.

The pony in my head stood teetering on the edge of a great, dark spiral. A bath covered with bones that lead forever downward into blackness. The currents of my rage pulled her towards it, a tidal force of crimson pouring into the abyss.

I pulled her back, and my rage shattered. The horror and sorrow and hurt that had been building just behind flooded in. I collapsed to my knees, sobbing openly.

"That's it," I heard Calamity say. He sounded so very far away. "Fuck diplomacy. Any pony who was part o' this, who even stood by an' watched, is a dead pony."

I realized I recognized the yellow-coated mare who lay disembowled in the corner… but I couldn't' remember when I had met her. Or what her name was. And that made it so much worse. Why couldn't I remember her name? She deserved to have her name remembered. She deserved to be alive!

Velvet Remedy, her own face wet with tears, trotted up and wrapped her forelegs about me, pulling me into an embrace as I heaved and sputtered and wept wretchedly against her armor and coat.

"Littlepip has been strong long enough," I heard her say. "This is my home too. I'll take it from here."

* * *

Calamity, Xenith and I formed our stealth team. As soon as I could quiet myself and move again, Velvet Remedy sent the three of us ahead. We were no longer looking to negotiate unless they offered the white flag first. Instead, we would strike first, fast, and with finality.

The first Steel Ranger whom I pumped full of bullets from the zebra rifle died in agony, screaming as his internal organs burst into flame, cooking him from the inside out. I didn't feel any remorse. No sympathy. Nor did I feel glee or even a grim satisfaction. My emotional deluge had left me fiercely numb and focused. The act was necessary and right, and beyond that had no more emotional impact than brushing my teeth.

I no longer felt even a twinge of revulsion for what Spike had done defending his own home.

We passed more dead ponies in every hallway. The Steel Ranger's attack had been brutal. But there were not nearly the number of dead that I would have expected. The friendship committee had been a well-calculated play on the Overmare's part. And when the Steel Rangers showed their true intentions right there in the entrance, they gave her enough forewarning for a rushed evacuation into the Security and Overmare's wing.

I both loved and hated her for that.

So far, the Maintenance wing had been hit the worst. The Steel Rangers had moved to secure it first, probably to prevent anypony from sabotaging the technology they were most interested in. The ponies down there had no time to get out before the Rangers had cut them off.

I turned the familiar corner and found myself face-to-face with the PipBuck Technician's stall. A fresh surge of emotion hit me as I saw the black scorchmarks on the walls I had once cleaned. A red trail of blood ran along one wall, dipping at the end until it met the corpse of my mentor. If I ignored the missing leg, I could almost pretend that he was asleep on the job again.

This was not the mural I had once hoped for.

I was crying once more, my vision blurring, making the lights of my E.F.S. swim.

The door into my mentor's office lay open. There was movement inside. A red splotch on my compass. I waved the others back and started to creep forward.

The Steel Ranger never saw me coming. I floated Little Macintosh up right behind her head, just to the left of the fins.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

I unloaded the full cylinder into her brain. She was probably dead after the first, but I didn't care.

I turned to walk out and froze as I spotted my mentor's hammock. There was an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle and a maintenance book *(TLC Squared: "Tender Loving Care for Totally Lost Causes")* laying on the floor beneath it. I remembered how my mentor would skim that book while talking in a direction vaguely connected to where I was sitting in rapt attention. Shedding tears of painful nostalgia, I floated the book into one of my saddlebags.

I heard the distinct sound of Calamity's battle saddle. A moment later, Xenith and Calamity dove into the PipBuck Technician's stall. The hallway outside erupted in flame.

"Little Macintosh ain't stealthy, Li'lpip!"

Xenith pulled a jar out of the small saddlebag she'd been using to carry her herbs and mixtures. She tossed it to the floor, where it shattered, spreading a licorice-scented goop. The zebra clopped her forehooves in the goop, then her hindhooves.

The rush of flames down the hallway stopped. A moment later, a grenade bounced into the room. I grabbed it with a telekinetic shroud and floated it back out the way it came. I heard a shout of alarm just before the explosion.

"Dammit. I hate unicorns!" the Steel Ranger said, letting us know he had survived largely unscathed.

I turned to Calamity and… where was Xenith? I looked around. Then up. She was crawling along the ceiling, the goop on her hooves providing a magical adhesion similar to the spell that the slavers on the train had used against us weeks ago.

She crept up to the doorway of the stall and peeked out, looking both ways before slipping back and mouthing "two". With small nods of her head, she indicated where, giving Calamity the same information my E.F.S. was giving me. I reloaded Little

Macintosh.

Then she snuck out, keeping flat to the ceiling, silent as a ghost. Calamity waited until the moment she dropped onto one of the Steel Rangers, then rolled out, facing the other and fired a single double-shot.

I charged out, swinging Little Macintosh around as I kicked on my targeting spell. But Xenith had already crippled the other pony, her hoofstrikes resonating through armor to pulverize internal organs. I let my jaw drop a little as she finished him off.

Fallen Caesar Style scared the crap out of me.

* * *

As we swept further into Maintenance, we started seeing glowing piles of green residue or pink ash – all that remained of ponies killed with magical energy weapons – scattered amongst the massacred ponies of Stable Two. Calamity found that disturbing.

My E.F.S. told me there were four Steel Rangers around the next corner, near the door to the generator room. I relayed this to the others.

"Ah'll take 'em," Calamity said, starting to move forward, but I put a hoof on his shoulder and shook my head. Calamity frowned. He didn't want to back off, but he did so anyway. The pegasus and the zebra held position as I galloped silently back to where Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves were waiting.

A moment later, SteelHooves trotted past Xenith and Calamity, and rounded the corner. His missile rack was open, his weapons primed.

"I am Star Paladin SteelHooves. I am declaring an end to this travesty of an operation. We do not assault the Stable of the Mare of our own Ministry. And we do not slaughter innocents when She was dedicated to protecting ponies." His voice rumbled with command. "You have two options. Side with me and stand by your Oath to the principles of our Ministry's Mare, or side with Elder Blueberry Sabre and Star Paladin Nova Rage and be gunned down."

"Then you admit you're a traitor!" one of them called back. "You stand down, and submit to arrest."

Wrong answer. SteelHooves fired everything he had into the hallway, which was torn apart in a blaze of light, heat and shrapnel.

"I don't think I'm going to be able to wear this armor anymore," he said, stepping back around to where we were waiting, his armor smoking and peppered with red-hot shrapnel. "Which is a problem, since I cannot take it off."

"Honestly," Calamity said with a grin, "Ya ain't never looked finer."

* * *

Xenith slipped through the back door of the Stable Two Saloon. I followed close behind, getting a surprisingly pleasant eyeful of the zebra mare's hindquarters. I found myself cursing the slavers who had scarred it so.

The back of the Saloon was a darkened kitchen. Well, darkened until Pyrelight flew in and landed on one of the pots sitting on a stove. The balefire phoenix had almost returned to normal, but was still shedding off enough energy to glow like a torch.

Mr. and Mrs. Sparkle Cider were dumped in a far corner, their bodies bleeding into each other. Mr. Sparkle Cider had always given me free ice cream when I was younger. (Well, until he caught me lockpicking his wine cabinet.) His wife had been one of my mother's friends.

Mrs. Sparkle Cider's hindhoof was caught on the door of the walk-in freezer, propping it open. All the ice cream inside was slowly melting, swirling in pools with the sherbet on the floor.

I felt an uncontrollable rage sweep over the numbness. My heart was pounding in my breast.

"It's clear," Xenith whispered, looking out into the Saloon itself. I passed the message back.

A minute later, I crouched in position at the door, loading the last of my bullets for Little Macintosh. The magical bullets. Calamity and Xenith remained in the kitchen, taking their turn as rear guard.

SteelHooves stood in the Saloon, looking out-of-place amongst the rich pseudo-wood décor. Velvet Remedy however moved with purpose, almost gliding up to the raised stage, the magic of her horn playing against the terminal and soundboards. Velvet Remedy had a plan. A moment later, she strode to the edge of the stage, looking down at SteelHooves.

My mind flashed back to sneaking into the Saloon, an underaged blankflank, hiding in the back of the crowd and watching as nearly adult Velvet Remedy performed. Her music moved my soul, and often it was agony not to dance.

"Ready," she said and her horn flared.

"Attention, Steel Rangers," SteelHooves began. His voice boomed throughout all of Stable Two. Velvet Remedy had commandeered the public address system.

"This is SteelHooves, founding member and eldest living of the Steel Rangers. Star Paladin of the Manehattan Contingent. I call on you to stop and consider your Oath. Consider where you are and what you are doing. Do your loyalties lie with Applejack, the Mare of the Ministry of Wartime Technology, the creator of the Steel Ranger armor and the mare who by Her own hooves, the sweat of Her brow and the honesty of Her heart forged the Steel Rangers? Or is your oath to the fearful, greedy ponies who abandon all that She stood for, turning us into little more than technology raiders, hoarding toys from the past because they have forgotten that it is virtue, not trinkets, that make a pony great? Ponies who now turn their eyes on Applejack's own home, commanding that you slaughter Her family for their greed? These orders, this operation, would be an *abomination* in the eyes of our Ministry's Mare!

"Applejack was put in charge of the Ministry of Wartime Technology because She was the Bearer of one of the Elements of Harmony, and the ruler of Equestria recognized the caliber of that. Do you think it was the Virtue in Her soul or the jewelry on Her neck that made Applejack a Bearer?

"Today, you must choose with whom your Oath lies. Surrender this ignominious goal and join by my side, reaffirming your Oath to the protection of the citizens of Equestria, just as Applejack dedicated Her life to. Or continue in this disgraceful act and face the wrath of those of us who choose to stand true!"

The glow around Velvet Remedy's horn faded. SteelHooves looked up at her. "Well… how was that?" She smiled brightly in response.

Three Steel Rangers charged into the Saloon, battle saddles filling the room with flames and machinegun fire. SteelHooves fell in the first volley.

I stared at the Steel Ranger, collapsed in spreading pool of the ichor that ghouls called blood.

I slid into S.A.T.S. and fired the last of Little Macintosh's rounds into them, felling one and crippling the second. I dropped Applejack's gun and swung about the zebra rifle as three more poured in. Behind me, I could hear the explosive blast of Spitfire's Thunder as Calamity decapitated the first Steel Ranger to try to get in through the back.

One of the five remaining Steel Rangers fired a pair of missiles up at Velvet Remedy. The unicorn singer threw up her shield as the rockets detonated against the underside of the stage, spraying the air with jagged chunks of pseudo-wood.

Another turned towards me, leveling what looked like an anti-material rifle at my head.

"No!" bellowed Velvet Remedy, her horn glowing and her voice magnified. **"This is *my* stage!"**

The room blazed with light conjured from Velvet Remedy's horn as she made herself the center of attention. The Steel Ranger in front of me sidestepped as Velvet Remedy's lightshow blinded her. The distraction gave me enough time to fire a burst from the zebra rifle, one bullet tearing through the visor of my opponent.

One of the Steel Rangers responded to Velvet with a roar from her twin miniguns. Velvet's shield held. I fired three more armor-piercing shots from the zebra rifle into the minigunner's head, seeing the flash of fire through the bullet holes. I could smell the pony's brain roasting.

Velvet whipped out her combat shotgun, firing it at the invaders, but their armor proved more than sufficient. It did not, however, protect them from her anesthetic spell. The Steel Ranger I had crippled went down.

Another Steel Ranger fired up at her with a back-mounted sniper rifle. The bullet tore through her shield and armor. I saw the look of shock and hurt in her eyes.

Pyrelight swooped in for the kill, blasting the downed ranger and the two still standing with radioactive flame. Their suits protected them against that as well, but the flames obscured their vision. I slid in and out of S.A.T.S., spraying each Steel Ranger until I was out of armor-piercing ammo.

Spitfire's Thunder sounded again. A moment later, Calamity and Xenith galloped into the room, knocking me over.

I realized I could smell gas.

Somewhere deep in the Stable, I heard a deep explosion that didn't sound like firearm or grenade. Alarm shot up my spine as I wondered if the Steel Rangers had managed to blow the security doors that the bulk of my home's population was hiding behind.

Xenith turned, grabbed me in her mouth and pulled me from the doorway.

WRRRRRRRRHHHHHHOSSSSH!!

The kitchen erupted, an inferno pouring out into the Saloon and setting fire to many of the pseudo-wood tables and chairs.

"Not one word 'bout muh name," Calamity panted, looking at Xenith. Then he saw SteelHooves and froze. A moment later, "Where's Velvet?"

I pointed upwards at the stage. I could see her fallen form. In the eerie silence that followed the battle, I could make out the sound of drops of blood falling from the stage to the floor below.

Blop. Blop. Blop.

"No." he whispered. His wings propelled him up to the stage far faster than either Xenith or I could have made it by hoof. The orange-maned pegasus landed and pulled Velvet Remedy into an embrace with a gasp.

"ow" whispered Velvet.

"Shush now, ya silly pony," Calamity said, holding her. "Ya dun got yerself shot. But ya gonna be right as rain, soon 'nuff. We got ourselves the best medical pony in alla the Equestrian Wasteland."

I started up the stage stairs towards them. Xenith was right behind me.

"ow!" Velvet said again. Then added, "Who's a silly pony?"

"Ya is, Velvet Remedy," Calamity insisted gently, "Ya beautiful, wonderful mare. Now shush it."

I reached the stage just in time.

I don't know what Velvet had started to say, but this time Calamity cut her off with a kiss.

"Aww," Xenith whispered in my ear. "I've been waiting to see those two do that since I first met them."

I was stunned at first. But then I realized that the little pony in my head wasn't feeling the slightest bit envious or jealous. She wasn't happy exactly, but that had more to do with the situation we were in and the fact that Velvet Remedy was bleeding all over Calamity from a bullet wound.

The air filled with an odd, unholy sound from down below. A chill filled the air.

SteelHooves stood back up.

My jaw hit the floor. I had sorely underestimated what it meant to be a Canterlot ghoul.

I didn't have time to marvel. "Oh fuck!" I moaned as two Steel Rangers took up positions outside, aiming grenade machineguns at the front windows of the Saloon. "Everypony, we've got to go!"

⁂

The Steel Ranger mare stepped through the door on the far end of the bathroom and opened up with a grenade machinegun of her own, blowing up the stalls and toilets between me an her. Heat washed over me, searing my lungs. Shrapnel cut at my armor and flesh, leaving me bleeding from dozens of small wounds. Outside, Calamity and Xenith crouched behind a row of lockers which I had floated into a barricade. We were getting close to the school where I had once taken my Cutie Aptitude Test, and the place was swarming with Steel Rangers.

I was out of ammo for Little Macintosh, and was actually beginning to fear for the zebra rifle.

We had been lucky taking them on one or two at a time, the element of surprise on our side. But now they were alert and moving against us in force. Only the narrow hallways prevented us from being surrounded or utterly overwhelmed.

A missile flew over the lockers, exploding against the wall behind Xenith and Calamity, the explosion blew them both hard into the barricade. Calamity rose up, dazed and bleeding. Xenith didn't get up at all.

"SteelHooves, Velvet!" I cried out. "We need your help!" The two of them were guarding our rear, Velvet considerably worse for wear even after downing both of our remaining extra-strength restoration potions. She needed to stay out of the heavy fighting, but we couldn't spare her entirely. The farther in we got into the Stable, the more ways to flank us opened up.

Another thunderous explosion sounded from somewhere deep in the Stable. Followed by more.

Water sprayed from all the destroyed toilets. The Steel Ranger's hoofsteps splashed as she approached closer. "Give it up, Littlepip." Crap. "Surrender now, and Elder Blueberry Sabre might just spare you and most of your friends. You won't get that offer from Nova Rage."

Yeah. That was going to happen.

"I don't suppose I can talk you into surrendering to us?" I called back. "Is mass murder really the Earth Pony Way?"

"Fuck you!" she retorted and opened up with another barrage of grenades. I wrapped all the debris around me in telekinetics and pulled them together, creating a shield. It didn't work very well. The first explosion blew the debris out of my magic's grasp, pummeling me with it. I felt bones break as pain surged throughout my body.

More grenades detonated around me. My PipBuck screamed as every limb registered as crippled. My PipBuck politely told me I was dying from internal injuries. I couldn't feel them. My body was in shock. All I could feel was cold.

Two missiles streaked through the air overhead, entering the room from behind me. They hit the Steel Ranger, blowing her off her hooves. She slid across the wet floor and collapsed in the corner, unmoving.

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy cried from forever away. I lost consciousness.

⁂

My eyes blinked open. I couldn't feel my body, but somehow I was still alive. My E.F.S. was reading my condition as bad, but stable. I was looking up. I could see lights of Stable Two overhead. Heard their ever-present buzz.

"Where am I?"

"Really, Littlepip," Velvet Remedy chided kindly. "With your habits of gross injury, you can't tell me you don't recognize Stable Two's clinic?"

"Calamity? Xenith?"

Velvet Remedy's face leaned into view. "The good news is that all three of you are going to survive reclaiming this floor. The bad news is that I've used up all our medical supplies and an unhealthy portion of the Stable's to save you." She glanced away. "A few of Xenith's brews too."

"Elder Blueberry Sabre had pulled most of her ponies back into the apple orchard," SteelHooves said. "She's worried now, and with good cause."

She's worried? They nearly killed us, and we were nowhere near the Security and Overmare's wing yet. I didn't understand why they weren't just swarming us and wiping us out. I said as much.

"Because there are less of them and possibly more of us," SteelHooves said bluntly. "About a fifth of the Rangers she was leading didn't take too well to what was going on down here. Star Paladin Nova Rage killed one of them for disloyalty and Elder Blueberry Sabre locked away the rest of the dissenters behind a welded door…"

Explained why diplomacy hadn't been working. All the ponies that diplomacy might have worked with the Elder had locked up.

"They're trapped in the school," Velvet interrupted. "SteelHooves has been speaking with them. If we can get them out, we'll have nearly a dozen Steel Rangers on our side."

"Unfortunately, we're having a bit of trouble with that. But Elder Blueberry Sabre doesn't know that. As far as she knows, the moment we took this section, we got a whole lot stronger."

I tried to get up only to realize that not only could I not feel pain, I couldn't feel *anything.*

Velvet Remedy had used her anesthetic spell on me. I tried to get up again, fervently sending the signals from my brain to a body I couldn't sense that ought to make it move. My body heaved and I fell to the floor with a thud, bloodying my nose. I couldn't feel that either.

"Now look who's a silly pony," Velvet Remedy giggled. "Stop that, or I'll tell Homage that you're into bondage and spankings." I couldn't feel myself blushing, but I'm sure I was.

As extra punishment, Velvet let me lay there on the floor as she turned her attention to Xenith. The zebra was still unconscious.

Calamity trotted in a short time later. "Ah'm afraid there ain't an easy way t' get that door open. Best bet its t' cut through it with a blowtorch, and that'll take hours." He whinnied. "On the plus side, seems like that's what the enemy is tryin' t' do with the S an' O wing. Only those doors are a helluva lot thicker, an' there's more than one o' them. Best bet, we've still got a couple hours b'fore they're through."

I forced my body to roll over, feeling an uneasy sense of accomplishment when I managed it on the third try. I found myself staring up at the ceiling rather than at my friends, which significantly diminished the victory.

"Y'know, magical energy weapons would melt through these doors a whole heap ova lot quicker."

"Steel Rangers' battle saddles aren't equipped with magical energy weapons," SteelHooves replied. "That is an Enclave design."

"Yeah," said Calamity in an odd tone. "Tha's what Ah figured."

My gaze fell on the grate to the air ducts. Unfortunately, while I was small, I was no chimera. I couldn't fit through them. But…

"Pyrelight!"

"Wha's that, Li'lpip?" Calamity asked.

"Pyrelight can get through the air ducts. She can carry a blowtorch to the good guy Steel Rangers trapped inside the classroom. Let them cut their way out," I suggested. "Plus, she can carry in food and water to them while they work."

"Ah like it," Calamity said, the grin I couldn't see evident in his voice. "Frees us up t' continue the mission, while we're still providin' diplomatic relief."

We had a plan.

* * *

So did Elder Blueberry Sabre. While we were busy, the bitch had welded shut every entrance into the Atrium except for the passage through the apple orchard.

The orchard was a huge, open space with only thin trees for nearly useless cover. She could amass her forces inside, creating a kill zone while a few of her soldiers worked on cutting through the security doors.

The best plan I could come up with was to float more lockers in front of us, forming a wedge two lockers deep and two lockers high. SteelHooves and Calamity were going to join me. Velvet had clearly taken far better care of us than of herself, unwilling to use up more than the minimal medical supplies on herself that we might have (and did) need later. She was still partially crippled from the gunshot wound, and I insisted that she stay behind as a "liaison" with Pyrelight. Xenith promised Calamity that she would stand guard over our wounded medical pony.

To claim that I was in good shape would have been an outright lie. But the pain I was in when the spell wore off was not the worst I had felt (definitely better than being set on fire by a dragon or bucked between the thighs by a scarily strong raider); I could work through it. My legs, fore and hind, all seemed to work, if stiffly. And could breathe without too much effort and feel my heart beat. Plus, I had my magic and my PipBuck. I was not in optimal fighting shape, but I really didn't need more. And there were ponies counting on me.

I'd already seen too many ponies whom I recognized lying dead on the Stable floor. I wouldn't allow Elder Blueberry Sabre or Star Paladin Nova Rage to add to that number.

SteelHooves trotted up behind me as I floated the lockers into formation. A moment later, another Steel Ranger trotted up… only it wasn't a Steel Ranger. It was Calamity, wearing a Steel Ranger's armor from the neck back. His black desperado hat was still firmly on his orange mane and he held Spitfire's Thunder in his mouth.

"What are you doing wearing that armor?" SteelHooves demanded. Calamity just gave him a look. "Okay, then how do you expect to fight in that? Magically-powered armor requires months of training to perform even adequately in."

"Whaf mef," Calamity mouthed through his grip on the unique anti-machine rifle.

I shook my head, sending up a prayer to Luna for our coming battle and a prayer to Celestia to keep Xenith and Velvet Remedy safe.

I telekinetically triggered the door.

* * *

My brilliant battle strategy lasted about two minutes. Like with the debris before, my magic couldn't hold the lockers against the explosive force of their missiles and grenades. I was forced to plant our barricade in the ground, creating a makeshift pillbox about twenty yards into the orchard. The Steel Rangers quickly surrounded us, firing into the lockers, slowly tearing away at our shielding.

Our line of sight was limited to small cracks between the lockers, purposefully not large enough to allow a grenade. Even so, I had focused my magic on flinging all grenades back at our attackers until they stopped trying that.

The gaps were too small for SteelHooves to fire through. Calamity was using Spitfire's Thunder to great effect, downing a Steel Ranger every time one was foolish enough to make herself or himself visible. The noise was deafening in our metal cage. My ears were ringing so badly I felt I would vomit, but I stayed on task.

But the pegasus was down to less than half a dozen rounds of the rare ammo (even after having pilfered some from the battle saddle of the anti-machine rifle Ranger in the Saloon). And the twin-minigun battle saddle integrated into his armor couldn't be aimed through the tiny cracks.

The zebra rifle was out of armor-piercing bullets, and the normal sort didn't have the penetrating power to take down a Steel Ranger. I was using my sniper rifle now. It too was out of armor-piercing ammo, but a well-placed shot to a weaker part of their armor would still go through. Part of me felt chagrin that I was becoming so practiced at defeating Applejack's creation.

Calamity and I kept firing.

"Sonuva…" Calamity mouthed as he fired a final shot. He motioned to me that he was out of ammo.

My hope had been that we could take out enough of them to make moving again an option. From all the red lights on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, we had done admirably… but we were still doomed. I had walked us into a trap with yet another stupid plan. And this time I had probably gotten all of us killed.

I wasn't ready to give up just yet. It was about time to try a rush and gallop. SteelHooves and Calamity still had their battle saddles; and for the first time, the one pony not in any danger of running out of ammo was our ghoul. Finally being willing to scavenge ammo helped immensely.

I focused, floating the lockers, and hurled them in all directions, aiming at the red marks on my E.F.S. compass. There wasn't a lot of force behind the throw, but I released them just before they hit and suddenly they went from flying weightless lockers to flying damn heavy lockers. A chorus of *THUD*s rang out as several Steel Rangers were clobbered and trapped underneath.

Unfortunately, Steel Ranger armor made them strong. They began to buck the metal weights off faster than I expected. We took off at a gallop, running across the orchard for the opposite door.

Gunfire and explosions erupted all around us. Dirt and wood filled the air. A missile roared past me, disappearing into the foliage of an apple tree before exploding. I felt applesauce splatter my face.

SteelHooves fired forward clearing a way ahead. Calamity, bemoaning the magically-powered armor's lack of wings, spun and poured out suppressive fire behind us. Several Steel Rangers fired back with light machineguns and miniguns, but their shots glanced off the power armor he was wearing.

Calamity swiftly turned, racing to catch up before one of them returned his fire with a missile or sniper round. He was doing far better in the suit than SteelHooves had anticipated, but nowhere near as well as Calamity himself had expected.

Still, it looked like we would make it. I pushed as far as my battle-weakened and overstrained body would take me… and I was the first to reach the door.

It was locked. And trapped.

Of course.

But this was not a problem for me. Well, not one of skill or tools. It was a problem of time.

Calamity and SteelHooves reached me as I attempted to disarm the explosive. SteelHooves began to guide me through it, his skills far surpassing my own, while Calamity turned to face the approaching Rangers.

"Give it up," called out Elder Blueberry Sabre as the Steel Rangers advanced, encircling us. I heard a click as the bomb disarmed. Now for the door.

I heard more clicks as every enemy Steel Ranger in the apple orchard reloaded. Elder Blueberry Sabre called out again, "Last chance. Give it up."

I sighed. Dammit. This was the damn Ministry of Morale rooftop all over again. "Why don't you just kill us?"

"Because now she needs to make an example of me," SteelHooves guessed. "And she knows that will go a lot smoother if she has hostages I care about."

"Or maybe I just need a good lockpicker," Blueberry Sabre answered. "Somepony who can get me past a security door."

Oh hell no.

A deep explosion rang out. One of the Steel Rangers fell, her midsection torn through. Several friendly lights suddenly danced across my E.F.S. compass.

But that was impossible, I thought. The Steel Rangers upstairs were still hours away from being freed. We wouldn't be getting reinforcements for…

A magical energy pistol appeared pointed at Elder Blueberry Sabre's head. It was held by a familiar-looking griffin, the hood of her cloak falling back to reveal her head.

Blackwing?

Elder Blueberry Sabre's eyes went wide as she realized the situation had dramatically changed. "Wh-where did you come from?"

Blackwing smirked as she pulled the trigger, the green beam from her pistol striking the pony between her eyes, turning her into a pony-shaped glow of luminescent green.

"Gawd sent me."

Elder Blueberry Sabre collapsed into a luminescent puddle.

* * *

The battle had changed. Arcs of magical energy from the small group of griffins were exchanged with the artillery fire of the Steel Rangers. Calamity and SteelHooves waded into the fight while I struggled to unlock the door with my telekinesis.

The door unlocked with a satisfying click and slid open. Beyond I could see the Atrium. But even before I could see it, I could smell it. The cloying stench of burnt pony hair and the reek of spilled blood, pooling and drying by the gallons, smashed into me like a speeding wall. This room had become a slaughterhouse.

Colorful, innocent ponies lay dead everywhere. In many cases, the same ponies could be seen in multiple places – one of the Steel Rangers had unleashed a grenade machinegun in the room. I stepped into the Atrium over a pink leg blown off at the knee.

I saw a yellowish clump of matter sliding down a wall, mixed with blood. It took me a moment to realize it wasn't part of a pony's brains.

It was cake.

I looked up and saw the colorful banner. The Steel Rangers had interrupted a Cutie Mark Party.

I felt rage. Pure, unadulterated rage.

I met three Steel Rangers on the Atrium balcony at the top of the stairs. Two of them were wielding auto-axes and were working their way through the third and final security door. They had about half an hour's work left to go.

I wrapped each of them in magic, floating them up and turning them towards each other before they could react and turn the auto-axes off. The magically-enhanced blades did exactly what they were designed to do – cut through metal. The flesh beneath offered no resistance at all. It was gruesomely messy.

I dropped them, but kept the auto-axes, turning to face the last of the Steel Rangers. "Star Paladin Nova Rage, I presume?" I noted her battle saddle had a grenade machinegun.

The Star Paladin stared at me. "Yes, and you are?"

"Run."

* * *

The adrenaline had once again left my body, and I *hurt*. Physically and emotionally. It was literally all I could do to stand up.

I had exorcised my rage, but that left only despair and a deep sadness.

The hour was long over – that blackest hour whose name I couldn't remember where the darkness of the world is echoed most heavily by the darkness in the soul. But I was still trapped there.

Blackwing joined me as I waited for Velvet Remedy and Xenith. The Overmare had surely been watching everything through the Stable's "Friendly Pie" observation system. But she had not yet opened the door.

"Gawd knows you've flown to our aid without contract, content to negotiate compensation after the fact," the griffin explained. "When we heard the distress signal, she decided to give you the benefit of the doubt and asked if my Talons would be willing to help."

"I'm thankful you said yes," I replied with a grim smile. My gaze kept drifting up to the gaily-colored Happy Cute-ceañera banner.

Calamity trotted about, flexing his wings, thankful to be out of the Steel Ranger armor. "Ah do not envy SteelHooves!" He looked up, "How the hell didja appear right next t' the Elder like that? StealthBuck?"

Xenith trotted up the steps to the Atrium balcony. She stopped abruptly upon seeing Blackwing. Velvet Remedy collided with her backside and stumbled with a moan. She was crying again. Calamity flew to her, wrapping her in one of his wings as she moved onto the balcony.

"My girls had to make do with StealthBucks, yes. But I…"

"Where did you get that cloak?" Xenith interrupted.

Blackwing gave the zebra a tolerant smirk. "Yes, as I was saying, zebra stealth cloak." She fixed me with a serious look. "You have more friends than I thought, kid. We'd barely made it past New Appleloosa when this pegasus ghoul and her kid flagged us down. Turns out, they'd heard the distress signal too and wanted to pitch in. Practically gave us enough SteathBucks to get in while all you ponies were busy with the Star-spawn and wage a war of our own. Not to mention the cloak. Which, I would note, I insisted on paying her for."

I looked over the railing at the other griffins in Blackwing's Talons. The deep explosions I had heard before were now obviously from Butcher's *Little Gilda.*

"I think she wanted to come in herself, but… well, she has a kid." A frown passed across Blackwing's beak. "Whom I'm really hoping she adopted. Because if not… ew."

"Sorry we didn't get to you sooner," Butcher called up to us. "Managed to get ourselves trapped in the generator room for the longest time. But then you ponies come along and not only take out the guards sealing us in, but most of the door too."

I was standing in an abattoir that had once been my home, and yet I found myself laughing. It was not a good laugh. It was a hurting, horrified, emotionally wrung out laugh. The laugh of a pony that can't scream or cry.

I forced myself to stop as the security door slid open. The Overmare stood there, gazing at us. Behind her was a throng of terrified ponies.

"Is it safe?" one of them asked. I found that I couldn't find my voice. I was petrified.

"Ayep," Calamity answered for us. "Rooted out the last of 'em. The ones in the school are good ponies who just got wrapped up in something really horribly bad. They'll be leaving soon with us." The auto-axes were making cutting through the welded door a much quicker task.

"Thank you," the Overmare said to all of us. Then she shooed the other ponies back inside. They did not need to see any more of what had become of the Atrium.

"Littlepip, Velvet Remedy, would you please come in?"

The Overmare motioned for us to enter the formerly sealed wing. Calamity slid his wing from Velvet and poked her towards the Overmare with his nose. She moved slowly, but with lady-like grace. I followed, feeling clumsy and small and horrible.

* * *

"…and then there was blood everywhere! Sparkling Cider did a wave of his hoof like this, and fell down…"

As the Overmare slowly guided us through the crowd towards her office, a familiar voice froze me in place.

"Mother?"

I looked up, and there she was. Standing in a small clique of friends (notably absent

Mrs. Sparkle Cider). She turned and looked at me with a vaguely scandalized expression. “Is that Littlepip?” she asked one of her friends.

The other mare answered in the affirmative.

“I don’t even recognize her,” mother said. Not with awe or maliciousness, but as a casual statement of truth.

I felt all the life drain from me as she looked me over. My blood had turned to ice water. My stomach knotted up, then sank to the lowest part of my body it could find. The world seemed to stretch away from me.

She turned away from me, delving back into her conversation, my presence barely augmenting her tale. “I was *traumatized.* I mean, I’m going to have nightmares of this forever. I’m going to need *therapy.* And as horrible as this sounds, my first thought was ‘that will never come out of his apron!’ (Because he was wearing that lovely yellow one with the…”

I spotted the glow from her horn, so very soft. And the bottle floating nearby, surrounded in the same light. She was drunk. Of course she was drunk… that’s how she had always protected herself from whatever crisis she thought she was going through, and this had been a real one.

Still… She was alive. Alive and exactly the same. I was right here. Again.

“Mom?”

Suddenly, Velvet Remedy was between us, and her hoof was striking my mother across the face so hard it knocked her down.

I stared. Velvet Remedy had just hit my mother.

Velvet’s voice sounded like she was throwing all the hurt and rage in her behind it. It wasn’t a scream, but it was somehow much louder than that.

“You. Have suffered. Nothing.”

She turned from my wide-eyed mother and lowered her head, pushing me away.

⁂

“There are no thanks which are enough for your bravery and heroism,” the Overmare told us, thanking us yet again for coming to Stable Two’s rescue.

“And Littlepip, I owe you such an apology. You are always welcome here. This is your home.”

I looked up at the Overmare. Then down at my body. I was caked in blood. Maybe half of it mine. “No.”

“No?” the Overmare asked.

“I have no place here. Not anymore.” I looked up at Velvet Remedy who was laying on a couch in the Overmare’s office across from me. “I’ve been outside for five weeks, and look at me. As much as I try, I’m not the same pony I was when I left, and I never can be. The wasteland has changed me, bloodied me… maybe even poisoned me like it has everything else outside. I can’t come back. I can’t bring that poison in here.”

“I think it’s already gotten in,” the Overmare said sadly.

I nodded. “I know. But these ponies are good ponies. Innocent ponies. They need to treasure that, and hold it as long as they can. You need to wash away the blood, clean away the bodies. Try to make Stable Two right again. Tonight will be enough of a nightmare already.”

The Overmare nodded. “Then… is there anything I can do for you in return for all you’ve done for us?”

I thought about it. Then looked into her eyes. “Yes. First, we need to arrange for some sort of payment for the griffins.”

“Payment?” the Overmare blinked. “Ah. I see. They are mercenaries.”

“Mercenaries who came to Stable Two’s aid without contract or promise of payment,” Velvet Remedy swiftly added. “Because they trust us to do right by them in return.”

“Then I will not sully your reputation, Velvet darling.” The Overmare turned to me. “And there was something else?”

“Yes. I want access to the Overmare records.” *That* she did balk at. “I want to look at the population records, nothing more.” Somehow, she liked that even *less.*

“I do as well,” Velvet Remedy said, getting up and moving to my side. I was still conflicted, wanting to simultaneously hug her and buck her for striking my mother.

“You know,” the Overmare said slowly, addressing Velvet, “When I gave you Sweetie Belle’s possessions to look through, it was with the hopes that her rich history as a musician would persuade you to accept your career. I hadn’t expected you to use the opportunity to find a way to escape.” She frowned. “CMC3BFF. Clearly, I needed to give the recordings of a previous Overmare a much closer inspection before allowing them into anypony else’s hooves.”

Velvet Remedy shook her head. “You had to have known.”

“I… may have suspected. But I thought you would make the better choice.”

“I did make the better choice,” Velvet Remedy said firmly.

* * *

I found what I was looking for in the population records within the first few minutes.

She made it!

Applejack made it into Stable Two. She was *here* when the Stable door sealed. According to the records, she lived peacefully for another twenty-five years. Happy… or at least as happy as somepony could be, living in a Stable and knowing the world above had been obliterated.

Still, she had survived. According to the records, she spent ten years down here bucking the Stable’s apple orchard until a hip injury forced her to retire. (The doctor’s addendum suggested that weakening hips might have been a genetic ailment common to her family.) Even after that, she spent another ten cooking for the Stable’s inhabitants from the kitchen of what was now the Stable Two Saloon.

She passed away peacefully, and unlike other Stable residents who were incinerated, the Overmare insisted that she be buried in the apple orchard. She was…

I paused in my reading.

* * *

I walked into Palette’s stall. The always messy, paint-splotched artist of Stable Two had survived the slaughter and already was diving into a new project.

The Steel Ranger stood very still in front of her, obediently at attention, as she painted over the symbol of magical sparks and gears with three candy-red apples.

SteelHooves plodded up to me. "I'm no longer fit to wear Steel Rangers' armor, but I can't take it off," he said as I took in his new look. Like the Ranger being painted, he too had the Steel Rangers' symbol painted over with the likeness of Applejack's cutie mark. The red paint continued from there, accenting the ridges and edges all over the rest of his armor. "So I thought this would be appropriate."

I was a little surprised he didn't go with orange, but I could see sticking with the cutie mark's color. "They're all doing it?" I asked, looking at the Steel Ranger being painted and then at the line down the hall.

"Everypony who has decided to return to the true meaning of The Oath. That is, the Oath as Applejack would have wanted it." He whinnied. "We won't be able to call ourselves Steel Rangers anymore. I won't be able to." He grumped, "That's going to take some getting used to."

"What will you call yourselves then?" I suggested, "Applejack's Rangers?"

"Hmph. I am hardly worthy of that. But… maybe. We will see. For now, we're simply outcasts." He looked away, his metal-sheathed tail swinging. "I have to go for just a little bit. I'm taking the others up to Stable Twenty-Nine. I've been in contact with Star Paladin Crossroads, and she immediately joined the cause. She's already planning to make Stable Twenty-Nine into someplace we can operate out of. All it needs is a functioning water talisman. But there's another problem…"

"Elder Cottage Cheese?"

"As Calamity would say: ayep," SteelHooves nickered. "Looks like you were right about him. Cross says he's sent a squad of Steel Rangers to the Canterlot Ruins to retrieve that 'Black Book' for him. But they haven't returned yet. If we can get to Stable Twenty-Nine before they do…"

"You have a ride."

"Do you really think Calamity can haul ten more Steel Rang… er Outcasts all the way to Fetlock?"

"It is a passenger wagon," I commented. "Besides, have you met us?"

SteelHooves laughed. "All right. But after you drop us off, you need to head on to Tenpony Tower. No more delays. I'll catch up to you later. I promise."

I nodded solemnly. I was going to hold him to that.

I started to walk away, and then remembered what had caused me to seek him out. "SteelHooves? We need to talk somewhere private."

* * *

"Applejack didn't leave you."

SteelHooves shook his head. "Yes she did. She chose to be with her family. And I don't blame her for that. I never have." He paced a little. "We… weren't exactly… our relationship was in a bad place. We were trying to put it back together, but… it really wasn't going to work, and we both knew it. I loved her, and I let her go."

I whimpered inside, but stood firm. "No, Applesnack," I said, using his real name. "She loved you. She tried to come back to you. But the Overmare wouldn't let her."

He stopped pacing and looked at me. “Wouldn’t let her?”

“She helped her family into the Stable, and the Overmare closed the door. Applejack didn’t know that the Stable Two Overmare was under strict orders not to open the door for anyone. Under any circumstances. Not until the atmospheric and soil monitors read that the world above was clean and safe again.”

“It’s been two hundred years…”

“I know. Stable-Tec grossly miscalculated how long it would take. But that didn’t matter because there was no way Sweetie Belle was going to let Applejack out. Applejack wanted to leave. She wanted to find you. The record for Applejack is full of annotations about her arguments with Sweetie Belle over this. But of course, with her condition, and with the readings outside, there was no way Sweetie Belle was going to let her back out.”

SteelHooves stomped. “Wait, her condition? Was she hurt? If those zebras…”

I could feel my heart sink. Oh Goddesses, he didn’t know.

“SteelHooves,” I said, my voice sounding tender and small in my own ears. “Applejack was pregnant.”

* * *

“I swear,” the Overmare huffed. “This is why I didn’t want you becoming a medical pony.”

Velvet Remedy glared at her crossly.

“You just can’t help yourself. You dig and pry. You and Littlepip are a match, you know.”

Velvet took a deep breath. “You have a serious problem here. Have you even looked at the population reports? Do you have any idea how many of the original inhabitants of this Stable were extended members of the Apple family? By Celestia, even Littlepip and I have a common Apple ancestor six generations back!”

I had stopped just inside the Overmare’s office, watching the two mares argue. Neither had noticed me.

“That’s not a big deal. Six generations is a lot…”

“This entire Stable is in danger of a becoming completely inbred,” Velvet Remedy shot back. “I’d say that’s a big deal. Littlepip was wrong. You can’t stay locked up in here for much longer.”

“Hello?” I finally said. The two mares turned to look at me with matching shocked expressions.

“Maybe there’s another way?”

* * *

One last detour. It was a small one. Fast. Fifteen minutes tops. We’d be back to pick up the Steel Ranger “outcasts” and ferry them to Fetlock before they knew it. And then, it was on to Tenpony Tower.

I needed Homage. I needed to just fall to pieces in her embrace.

“I found one.” Velvet Remedy read the words scrawled in foal-like letters on the side of the metal monster rusting in front of us.

It was a cannon. And it had probably been rusting here for years even before the war. The Goddesses only knew what it had been doing this secluded portion of Sweet Apple Acres. The trees here grew close. The cannon would only have been visible to a pegasus flying almost directly overhead. And it certainly didn't seem pointed anyplace strategic.

Small patches of the old metal muzzle were still polished enough to reflect the orange light of the rising sun. The base was partially sunken into the ground amongst several large rocks, making the weapon cant strangely. Nearby was a crumbling picnic table. There were a few planks of wood nailed to a dead tree behind me.

"How would this have helped?" Xenith asked Calamity. I had to admit I was asking the same question. This old metal monster couldn't possibly fire.

Calamity chuckled. "Not the cannon." He trotted around the pile of large stones that the base was partially leaning against. He tapped his hoof on one, then another. "This one."

"A rock?" I asked.

"The Rock of Destiny," our pegasus friend says, grinning cryptically.

I was tired, physically and mentally exhausted. I couldn't keep up. "Destiny is a rock?" Even Velvet Remedy was looking confused.

Calamity sighed. "Hollowed out rock," he explained. "This rock has been used by every Dashite since the first pegasus was hunted down by the Enclave and branded fer leavin'. It's enchanted to open only fer somepony who done know the proper pass-phase." He looked down at the apparently special rock. "Every Dashite has put somethin' in here. Some token of the life they left behind."

"How did a pegasus enchant a rock?" Velvet Remedy asked.

Calamity shrugged. "Well, Ah assume she had somepony else do it fer her."

"Or perhaps a zebra helped her," Xenith offered.

Calamity took a deep breath, tapped at the rock again with his hoof, and said loudly and clearly:

"Cutie Marks don't matter."

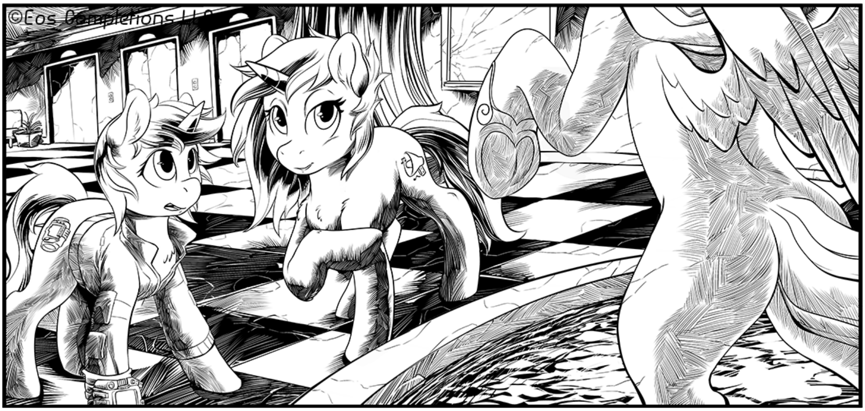
Footnote: Level Up.

Skills Note: Firearms has reached 100%

New Perk: Zebra-Augmented Pony – You have allowed your body to be permanently enhanced through zebra alchemy. You gain +10% to your Poison, Fire and Radiation Resistances and +3 to your damage threshold. (Note: Zebra-Augmented Pony and the cybernetic implant perk Cyberpony are mutually exclusive.)

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Racing Apotheosis



"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria, there were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land. To do this, the eldest used her unicorn powers to raise the sun at dawn. The younger brought out the moon to begin the night…"

"Fuck.

"You know what irony is?"

I recognized the voice of Scootaloo. Even though it was raspy. Even through all her coughing, and the mad clicking, and the roar of the wind all around her.

"Irony is that it feels I spent my whole damned childhood trying to get my cutie mark, and I don't have it anymore.

"Irony is that I spent most of the last decade working to save Equestria from a megaspell end-of-the-world…"

Scootaloo's voice cracked, followed by a barrage of wet, raspy coughs.

"…and then it happened and I wasn't even fucking here. Broke my damn wing in a stupid damn accident while practicing a new routine for the damn GALLoPS. By the time I got out of the Hanovaerian pegasus clinic, it was all over.

"Irony is that I'm the one who made Sweetie Belle the Overmare of Stable Two. I was beginning to worry about her. Now, she's probably the only one of us who has survived. I…"

The recording was interrupted by another fit of coughing.

"…Apple Bloom was s'posed to be in Fillydelphia. Can't even get near that place. A pony would die from the radiation in minutes. I actually considered banging a hoof on Stable Two's door… but then I saw all the bodies. Sweetie Belle did right. Didn't open the door for anypony. Can't let this poison in. Contaminate that whole Stable. If I knocked, Sweetie Belle just might open the door for me. And I can't let that happen.

"Fuck.

"I'm giving up my PipBuck. Leaving it here with this message. I figure, if Apple Bloom survived, she'll come looking here. If not, somepony else will. Besides, I'm sick of it clicking. I don't need it yelling at me that the snow is radioactive and that I'm breathing poison. The air is fucking green…" More coughing. "'Cept for those weird pink swirls comin' off of Canterlot. When you can see the air, you know it's bad…

This time, the coughing fit lasted minutes.

"Fuck. That's blood. That's so not good.

"They kept telling us the cloud curtain was for our own protection. Keeping the radiation and megaspell pollution from getting into pegasi cities. Who knew that they were telling the truth? Fuckers said the brand is to mark me as somepony who's been below. Contaminated. Now I know that's horseapples. Told them… heh. Told them I was proud of what Rainbow Dash did. Called myself a Dash-ite. Boy, that got their feathers in a bunch.

"Irony is… I worked really hard to find a better way. Some kinda society or government or something that would be better. Wouldn't make the same damn mistakes that killed everypony. And I get trapped up there with a whole slew of ponies who seem dedicated to finding the worst way ever. Even I wouldn't have tried an experiment like the 'Enclave'… the Stables aren't set up to fail. Hell, I give the Enclave a few months at most."

Scootaloo's voice stopped. But no cough this time. Just harsh breathing. After a moment, she continued.

"If you find this… before I'm gone…"

She was cut off by an explosive cough, followed by several moments of silence. Then a groan.

"If you find this… there's a shack marked on it. I traced Rainbow Dash to there. I think she's living there… or was recently. Wasn't there when I looked. But I'm headed back. Going to wait there… hope she returns.

"I should be there for her. Like she's with me. Somepony should be there…"

Scootaloo coughed one final time.

"Just want Dash to know… we didn't all…

"She's not alone."

* * *

I reverently placed the battered old PipBuck back into the Rock of Destiny where it had rested for nearly two centuries. The PipBuck of the first Dashite lay once again with the discarded treasures of Dashites to follow. All except for Calamity, whose relinquished possession of his old life we had come to reclaim.

At Calamity's hooves lay the black carapace of Enclave armor. The tips of the built-in magical-energy rifles flickered with a wicked light.

"She don't rightly belong t' me, Ah reckon," Calamity said. "They belong t' Captain Deadshot Calamity o' the Grand Pegasus Enclave. An' he ain't 'round no more. But after seein' Velvet put on that zebra suit, Ah figure it's a might stubborn an' foalish o' me t' not at least drag 'er out an' carry 'er round with us. In case things get bad 'nuff t' call fer puttin' 'er back on."

Calamity looked up at us, face reddened under his rust-colored coat. "Y'know, since we 'ave t' repack everything anyway."

I nodded, remembering the overturned *Sky Bandit* and the swath of scattered possessions.

"So, my buck was a captain?" Velvet Remedy purred, wrapping the Enclave armor with her magic and floating it off the ground.

My buck? I felt the stirrings of a chuckle. I'd been sure that Calamity would end up being Velvet Remedy's Calamity, not the other way around. But the mare certainly wasted no time.

I smiled at the both of them. This was good.

The whole world was filled with so much bad. My friends needed some good, and I was glad they could find it in each other. I thought of Homage and was thankful to her. Without Homage, I'm not sure my heart could have been so generous.

Calamity stammered, blushing harder.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Velvet asked gently, rubbing her head soothingly yet coaxingly against Calamity's neck as she floated the creepy black carapace to their side.

"uh… well, she's got quad Novasurge rifles… muh own design…"

"That's not what I meant."

Calamity stared away. "Ah know." He turned back to her. "Really, there ain't much t' tell. They made me Captain. An' with the promotion came new duties. Ah was assigned t' lead a wing o' scouts down below the cloud curtain."

He saw my surprise and explained, "The Enclave ain't stupid. They been sendin' scouts down here jus' 'bout twice a year t' get the lay o' things fer ages. Then they put out reports tellin' the civilian ponies that the world down here ain't ready fer us yet, or the air ain't breathable. Keeps everypony happy t' just fritter away their lives above.

"Only that ain't how it actually is down here. Ain't been fer a long time. An' when Ah saw that… well, Ah kinda made waves. Then, on muh third patrol, Ah saw a buncha raiders hittin' a caravan…"

I knew what was coming. "Your policy?"

"Ayep. Ordered muh wing t' take the raiders out. They refused. So afterwards, Ah had 'em locked up fer een-subordination. Higher-ups took unkindly t' that. Told me they was givin' me one chance t' correct the path Ah was on, or there'd be hell t' pay."

Calamity snorted and dug at the ground with a hoof. "They put me in front o' an assembly t' address everypony an' tell 'em how there ain't nothin' down here t' save yet. Show 'em all just how much Ah was hitched t' the party wagon."

Velvet Remedy backed up and looked Calamity over. "Well, *that* was foalish of them."

"Ayep." Calamity's muzzle broke into a grin. "Ah reckon it had been so long since somepony had bucked the Enclave that they forgot it could happen. Ah stood right up there an' told everypony that we needed t' get down here now." He paused, "…Well, then. Y'know what Ah mean. Anyways, Ah told 'em I was leavin' and that they were free t' follow."

Calamity lifted a hoof to scratch his mane under his hat. "Didn't hear 'bout how Ah s'posedly killed muh own wing 'till 'bout six months later."

I remembered what Calamity had said back in Fillydelphia: *Most dictatorships Ah know* *of tend t' go hell-an'-highwater t' either discredit or destroy opposin' voices like that.*

I trotted over and wrapped a foreleg around Calamity in a hug. (Which, I note, was a little tricky since he was a fair bit taller than me.)

"Thanks, Li'lpip."

Something occurred to me. "So…" I asked Calamity as I dropped back to all four hooves, "Most of the pegasi don't realize what's going on down here?"

"They ain't bad ponies, Li'lpip," Calamity whinnied. "They're just bein' bamboozled by their leaders. Even in the best governments, the ponies at the top don't tell the rank-n-file what's actually goin' on." He trotted in place. "Y'think the better folk o' New Appleloosa 'ave any idea jus' how connected they are t' Red Eye?"

I remembered the way the ponies in Turnpike Tavern laughed at the notion of "that buck on the spritebots" being anypony's leader. On the other side of the bottle cap, I was willing to bet Sweetie Belle didn't tell anypony in Stable Two about the friends and relatives dying just outside the Stable door, breaking their hooves against it as they begged to be let in.

Hell, I was supposedly the leader of these ponies, and I was keeping secrets of my own. (The truth about the Ministry of Peace and the megaspells came swiftly to mind.) So I supposed that Calamity's assertion was true.

"Li'lpip, if most o' the ponies up there saw fer themselves what's goin' on down here, they'd buck the damn Enclave and pony up t' help." Calamity's confidence faltered. "Well, most being at least more'n half, Ah reckon."

I felt an odd tug at one of my saddlebags. I turned to see Velvet Remedy's PipBuck float out, enveloped by Velvet Remedy's magic. I watched the polished PipBuck (with its custom engraving of Velvet Remedy's singing nightingale) glide across the air and gently set itself down in the Rock of Destiny next to Scootaloo's.

"I hope it's not presumptuous," she said to Calamity, sounding slightly apprehensive. "I'm not a Dashite, but I am leaving an old life behind. And it feels wrong to be taking something out without putting something in its place."

"Thank ya kindly," Calamity responded, approving.

I brought up the inventory sorter on my PipBuck, scrolling through it until I realized with a pang that I didn't have anything from my life in the Stable to give up.

I stared forlornly at the Rock of Destiny, feeling like I was failing somehow. I'd already left everything in Stable Two behind. I probably would have sealed a picture of my mother up inside the rock, but I didn't even have that.

No… but I did have something.

Biting my lower lip, I pulled up the recipe for Party-Time Mint-als. I would give this up, but I didn't want anypony else to suffer from them as I had. The first night Outside, I had discovered a message from Apple Bloom to Sweetie Belle which used a very special encryption. I used that now as I sent the recipe to Velvet Remedy's PipBuck. No pony would be able to read the recipe without downloading it from both her PipBuck and mine.

I erased the recipe from my PipBuck.

Somehow, it was both liberating and frightening.

Stable Two. I was leaving it again. This time it hurt worse. Probably because I knew that I would never return *even though I could.*

I felt weary beyond simple exhaustion. The mental toll of the night before was compounding the physical expense of the battle, and of nearly dying once again. I stared at Calamity, who somehow managed to seem almost normal despite not only having gone through much the same, but having been up for a full day, much of which was spent dragging the *Sky Bandit.*

Almost normal. He had been ruthless, I was told, in hunting down the last of the Steel Rangers. I did not begrudge him that. But this had been more than his code, more than his "policy". We were his closest friends, and he'd take the assault on our former home personally.

Then again, with the exception of Xenith and Pyrelight, we all did. For our own reasons.

"Calamity?" I asked as I floated the *Sky Bandit* up off the ground. "When we first met, and you told me you didn't live in New Appleloosa, you said you had a little shack?" I had a suspicion.

Calamity landed on it and trotted in place. Now weightless, the passenger wagon rolled easily under his hooves until he had it upright.

"Ayep," he replied. "An' t' answer the next question, ayep t' that too. Got the marker off the first Dashite's PipBuck by linkin' t' it wi' muh amor. Jus' b'fore givin' it up."

"Did Rainbow Dash ever return to the shack? I mean, do you know?"

"Ah don't reckon she did," Calamity stated, his words sending a wave of bitter sadness through my heart. "When Ah got there, Ah found a pegasus skeleton curled up in a corner which Ah buried out back. Figure if Rainbow Dash had come back, there woulda' been two."

Another pang shot through my heart. Calamity had done better for Scootaloo than I had for… anypony who had passed on. I felt a steely resolve build within my sorrow.

"Before we go, we should bury the skeletons in the apple cellar tunnel," I said firmly. "I know we're on the clock, but dammit if I'm gonna leave here again without doing that."

Calamity nodded just like I knew he would. Velvet Remedy trotted closer, levitating another pile of scavenged goods. "This would be so much easier if I had a Find Our Stuff spell."

"Y'know, if we're takin' all these detours, maybe we oughta swing by muh ol' place," Calamity suggested. "Ah could gather up a few tools. An' Li'lpip could have a crack at the floor safe nopony's been able t' open." There was a twinkle in his eye when he said that. I heard Velvet stifle a snicker.

I facehoofed. Oh now that's just not playing fair.

The clean-up and the Rock of Destiny had already eaten the first hour of daylight, and the burials would take up more. We'd be lucky to make Fetlock by sundown. But then: floor safe! A floor safe in a shack that both Rainbow Dash and Scootaloo had once called home… if extremely briefly… no less. The curious little pony in my head was prancing around eagerly, suggesting all sorts of possibly important or interesting things that might be inside.

I shot Calamity a look. “You think you can use my weakness against me that easily?”

“Ayep.”

I hoofstomped. “Okay, yes you can. But just this once.”

“Ayep. Sure.”

⁂

Ultimately, the burials added less than an hour to our departure time. SteelHooves’ Outcasts weren’t all painted and ready to leave until halfway through the effort.

“I’m glad you’re finally with us,” a paladin buck named Bitter Bright told SteelHooves as they finally began to march into the *Sky Bandit.*

“It should have been sooner,” SteelHooves stated grimly. “I should have done this when there was a chance for a peaceful break. This will be a civil war. And a bloody one.”

Paladin Bitter Bright nodded. “Star Paladin Crossroads has already locked Elder Cottage Cheese’s communications down, and sent out warnings to those in the other contingents who would follow us. With any luck, they’ll be able to slip away before word of what happened here reaches the other Elders.”

I swallowed. “What happens then?”

Paladin Bitter Bright neighed. “If we had done this years ago, with an Elder taking the lead, then those who believe the Steel Rangers should be following the Ministry Mare and helping the ponies of Equestria could simply have transferred to the new Elder’s contingent. We would have been… looked upon poorly, but the voice of an Elder is law. Now…”

The Steel Ranger Outcast took a moment of silence before continuing. “Now we are seceding. We are traitors and mutineers. Once the Elders learn of this, any within their ranks who empathize with us will be exterminated.”

Oh. Celestia grant mercy.

“Hopefully,” SteelHooves added, “Those who would join us can make it out before then. They will be galloping towards Stable Twenty-Nine. We will need to have it secured by then, or they will be galloping into a trap.”

“Well, except for Trottingham,” Knight Strawberry Lemonade piped up, joining the conversation as she moved to stand uncomfortably close to SteelHooves. My friend looked around as if searching for some trivial task to give her. “In Trottingham, there are more of us than there are of them. In Trottingham, I bet the Elder will be the one abandoning ship.”

The pony in my head whimpered, watching my actions ripple out into war and bloodshed. “I’m so sorry…”

“For what?” Paladin Bitter Bright asked. “None of this is your fault or your doing. Except that because of you and your friends, this squad isn’t dead at Nova Rage’s hoof or still trapped in that Stable school waiting to die of thirst and starvation.” He nickered, “This battle started the moment Nova Rage killed one of us and locked the others away. And that happened hours before any of you showed up. This is on her. And on us. Hell, *we* should be apologizing to *you* for not saying enough until *after* the others started slaughtering the poor ponyfolk in the Ministry Mare’s Stable.”

"It's on me," SteelHooves said with finality. "This has always been on me."

As he plodded past me, he lowered his helmet and whispered into my ear, "It's better that my child never knew me."

* * *

Blackwing and her Talons flew with us part of the way, delivering news of their victory back to Gawd, along with the details of a five-year plan that the Overmare and Blackwing had sketched out upon my suggestion.

"Y'all sure we shouldn't stand there with ya at Stable Twenty-Nine?"

"No," SteelHooves told Calamity. "This is an internal matter now."

I listened to DJ Pon3's broadcast in my earbloom, but there had been no news yet of Stable Two. Nothing that could forewarn the Elders that their ranks were breaking. I prayed that the silence would last until I reached Homage.

It was another stroke of luck that Calamity's Shack was only a little bit out of our way towards Fetlock and Manehattan. It was, however, completely in the opposite direction of Splendid Valley. I began to worry what Red Eye might do if we delayed too long. I was hoping that his twisted generosity would extend to giving me time to rest after everything I had gone through.

"What will we do once we reach Tenpony Tower?" Xenith questioned.

"Will Red Eye even let you get there?" Knight Strawberry Lemonade asked, moving to a bench near me. SteelHooves had managed to successfully maneuver behind several other Steel Rangers, preventing her from reaching him. I found the little dance amusing, partially because her voice was so cute. (Even more so coming from inside that fearsome armor.) Partially because it was finally somepony else's turn to feel a little uncomfortable.

"Red Eye has the place surrounded," I said, frowning. "Shooting our way in would be a bad move. But we could try sneaking our way in…"

I recalled what Homage said in her fake letter to me: *Then, later, we can meet where we met before, and I promise…* Well, ahem, no need to dwell on what she promised. The important part was, "I know of a roof access that Red Eye's troops probably don't. And I believe Homage is watching for us to land there."

The others nodded. Xenith looked concerned. "Will they even allow a zebra inside?"

"Homage will," I assured her. Xenith may not get the run of the tower, but there was no way we were leaving her out in the cold.

As we approached the turning-point for Calamity's shack, Blackwing swooped close, flying alongside the *Sky Bandit.* The griffin signaled me.

"Do you think Gawdyna will be satisfied with the payment?" I called out over the rush of wind.

Blackwing barked a laugh. "I think she'll be surprised. Disturbed, maybe. She was hoping for rights to draw from Stable Two's water talisman. Instead, she's getting an offer to move the entire damn population of Stable Two, as well as its most valuable assets, to her domain."

As Velvet Remedy had determined, Stable Two could not afford to remain isolated for much longer. The population needed to genetically spread, to introduce new breeding stock from the Outside. But they couldn't just open the Stable door. Not with Stable

Two near the edge of the Everfree Forest and an hour's trot from raider territory. They needed to move. Shattered Hoof provided additional population and safety.

With this plan, the water talisman would be moved to Junction R-7, and the entire subterranean apple orchard would be relocated to the mines underneath Shattered Hoof. The ponies of Stable Two would start building homes in the land between Junction R-7 and the old prison. It would be a massive undertaking, but then Old Appleloosa had been built by earth ponies in a single year.

It felt odd knowing that my new home was going to become my old home. Within five years, Junction R-7 was going to be the center of a *town.*

"I'm more worried about the delay," I called out. "It's going to be a few months, at best, before the ponies in Stable Two can actually start the move. Right now, the area outside the Stable is just too dangerous." The Everfree Forest exodus, however, was just a part of the problem. I was even more worried about retaliation from the Steel Rangers.

So for now, the Stable was sealing itself up again. The ponies of Stable Two needed time to process and cope with the trauma. They needed time to clean the Stable and rebuild their lives. They wouldn't be able to forget; and part of me thought that was good, as it would prevent them from losing sight of what they owed and the changes that needed to be made.

"Gawd's patient," Blackwing commented. "But you've got other problems. Only way to ferry the orchard to Shattered Hoof is by rail. And those tracks pass through New Appleloosa."

Crap. That's right.

"We'll work something out," I assured her. "But I've got to deal with Red Eye first."

I sounded more confident than I felt. But Calamity's words had reminded me that while there might be questionable or even downright villainous ponies in high places at New Appleloosa, the bulk of the townsfolk were good ponies. Hell, Ditzy Doo lived there.

The thought of the ghoul pegasus brought up another responsibility. I had to find a way to thank her. We all owed her our lives. Without those StealthBucks, which she had given freely to aid Blackwing in saving the ponies of my home…

I moved away from edge of the *Sky Bandit* as Blackwing veered off, the other griffins following closely. Butcher blew a kiss in our direction. I think it was for SteelHooves, but I had no idea why. Maybe just the camaraderie that comes with a mutual love of excessive firepower.

Calamity winged us in the other direction. "This won't take long," I assured SteelHooves and the Outcasts.

* * *

"That's one giant cloud o' scary black smoke," Calamity commented as we approached his shack.

The smoke from the Everfree Forest fires had tinted the air an angry salmon hue. Calamity's shack, nestled halfway up a rugged plateau, was slightly closer to New Appleloosa than it was to the closest border of the Everfree Forest. But while it was nowhere near the fires, the prevailing winds were blowing the smoke for miles.

I'd grown accustomed to the strange, sickly quality of the air Outside, but Scootaloo's PipBuck message brought back memories. That first morning in the Equestrian Wasteland – how the sheer oddness of it struck me. This was altogether different. I could smell unnatural odors riding in the smoke. I could taste something pungently bittersweet with each breath.

"Should we be breathing this?" I asked Velvet Remedy. I was reminded of the dangers of working in the parasprite incinerator pits. Did anypony know what nastiness the smoke from the Everfree Forest might carry with it? I suddenly envied the Steel Rangers (Outcasts and otherwise) for the rebreathers built into their armored suits.

"Probably not," Velvet Remedy said, doing absolutely nothing to assuage my fears.

The cliffs around the shack were precarious with no safe path to ascend and no outcropping to land the passenger wagon. It was, after all, a home for a pegasus. Calamity was forced to land at the base of the cliffs. After brief discussion, it was suggested that Calamity and I would head up alone.

"Oh no," Velvet Remedy put her hoof down. "You did not bring us all the way here, Calamity, to your old home, only to not let me see it."

Calamity nickered, looking apprehensive and a bit embarrassed.

"Come on now," Velvet purred. "I showed you mine; now you show me yours."

I tried very hard to think of other things. "Tell you what: I'll levitate myself up there while you two fly up."

"Can ya do that, Li'lpip? Levitate yerself that far?"

To be honest, I wasn't sure. Self-levitation had always been the hardest trick. I wanted to give it a try. But I didn't want to suffer the fall if I failed.

"Be ready to catch me?" I asked meekly. Calamity nodded, stretching out his wings confidently.

(Somewhere behind me, I heard Xenith ask somepony, "Why do they not just make two trips?")

I looked up, pointing my horn towards the shack. And swallowed nervously. It was… very high.

My horn began to glow. Focusing, I enveloped my body with a magical envelope and pushed off from the ground. I had done this much before; but just as in the Pit, my ascent had begun to slow rapidly. I focused harder and tried to pull myself upwards.

I was still slowing.

I concentrated, sweat beading on my forehead and running down my neck. An overglow flared around my horn, casting reflections on the cliff rocks.

I stopped slowing. I was doing it! I was pulling myself through the air!

I was… pushing exhaustion. The effort was almost painful. But I was doing it.

I was flying!

⁂

I lay on the little strip of wood that amounted to Calamity's front porch, panting heavily. My legs didn't want to hold me up. Oh, they could if I asked, but they didn't want to.

It was worth it. For just a little bit, I was actually flying.

It had not been a graceful act of freedom; as I was neither a pegasus nor a bird. It had been work, like galloping uphill against the wind. But I had done it. And for a moment, all the horrors and pain of the last few days was forgotten in the rush and exertion.

I wondered how long it would take Calamity to fly up here with Velvet Remedy. Not long, my mind answered swiftly. In fact, I was surprised they weren't already here.

I remembered that I still had a memory orb from one of the safes in the Fillydelphia Ministry of Magic vault – the orb from the safe which had also held a cloak. (Judging from Xenith's reaction and recent griffin-related experience, I deduced that it had been a zebra stealth cloak.) I decided abruptly that I didn't want to spend the wait laying sweaty and wiped on Calamity's porch. So I floated out the memory orb and focused on it.

And immediately knew it was a mistake, remembering that the orb had come from a ruined box and was likely damaged itself, but it was too late.

My body exploded, every nerve being flayed as I was burned over and over without dying. I knew my real body must be screaming and thrashing, but the pain was too intense to even fear for my safety. In fact, falling from the cliff side and being dashed on the ground below would be a mercy.

A thousand white-hot knives sliced through my brain.

An eyeblink or an eternity later, the pain stopped as abruptly as it started. And I was no longer myself…

* * *

I wasn't even a pony. This was a familiar strangeness. And I could feel the cloak draped about me, the hood over my mane and ears (as well as a saddle-pouch and something strapped to my side). This too was familiar. I was invisible again. A fact all too easy to glean as I watched a stallion admiring himself in a mirror – a mirror which should also reflect my host from this angle, but did not. My host was a zebra in a stealth cloak. Possibly the same one as before.

"If you won't accept my offer, then you should at least consider availing yourself of your good fortune that I am willing to pose for your new publication," the stallion suggested as he preened himself. He was a regal, haughty white unicorn, quite handsome in his elder years. "I am, after all, the best pony."

"Hardly," intoned an elegant voice which could only belong to Rarity. If the stallion had noticed the slightly disparaging tone, he showed no indication of comprehending it. "There is no place for grandstanding or glory-hounds in the Ministry of Image. Our purpose here is to help the *client* shine all across Equestria, not ourselves. And our client is *all of Equestria* itself. *We* should remain invisible."

With a politely sweet tone, she encouraged, "Perhaps you should try the Ministry of Awesome."

We were in an office. A rather nice one at that, with elegant curtains and golden trim on the wainscoting. It certainly lacked the humbleness I had come to expect from a Ministry of Image building, which told me this was no M.I. hub, but the Ministry's headquarters on Ministry Walk in Canterlot – the one place where even the Ministry of Image would have to maintain an image.

"That's easy for you to say," the stallion frowned. "You're already in charge of one of the most important branches of Princess Luna's new government. You're already in a position far beyond your wildest peasant dreams."

Wow. I was quickly forming a rather strong dislike for this buck.

Rarity's riposte was controlled, calm, even charming. "Humility was a lesson hard learned, in fact. It's called maturing. Something which, sadly, you seem to have little acquaintance."

"This is some sort of revenge, isn't it?" Amazingly, the stallion still hadn't bothered to glance at the beautiful mare he was talking to. If he was the subject of my host's surveillance, then the magical cloak seemed superfluous.

"A lady is not vengeful," Rarity informed him with a refined tone.

"But you are not a lady," the stallion replied thoughtlessly. "You are a government official."

I wanted to deck him.

"You are quite fortunate that I *am* a lady," Rarity responded, her voice lowering. "And that I do not have a nearby cake."

I had no idea what cake had to do with the conversation. But at least my host finally turned her attention to the gorgeous white unicorn. Again, she looked younger than I would have expected, and there was no grey in her hair.

She really knows how to take good care of herself, I thought admiringly. I bet she dyes her mane.

"And I am a prince," the stallion informed her, finally deigning to turn his gaze away from himself and towards the mare he was addressing.

Proposal?

"Really?" Rarity rolled her eyes. "I have long operated under the assumption that your lineage was a joke perpetrated by Princess Celestia on…" She paused thoughtfully before concluding, "…anypony who ever met you."

Rarity's horn glowed.

"If you were to accept my proposal, then you would be a princess," the prince continued obliviously.

Oh Goddesses fuck me in a three-way, this jerk actually *proposed* to Rarity? That's what he meant by accepting his *offer?* A proposal isn't an offer, it's a *request.*

Rarity glanced around, then sighed. "Yes, and you would gain a hoof in one of the most powerful Ministries in Equestria. Or, at least, that would be what you seem to think." She looked askance. "I cannot imagine any world where that would be worth it."

The prince huffed. "You speak as if I am not sacrificing greatly myself in this arrangement. As your husband, I would almost certainly be expected to have relations with you."

Un. Be. Lievable!

I focused, trying to make my host run over and buck him through sheer force of will.

Rarity stared silently. Her eyes slowly narrowed. Her horn glowed briefly again. "This conversation is over. Prince Blueblood, it is time for you to leave. If you have any further business, please address it to anypony other than me. Your presence causes me physical pain."

"I am a prince, and a member in high standing in the courts of Canterlot. You would do well to…"

"But I don't want to," Rarity interrupted. "I don't like you. In fact, I find you quite horrid. I despise that my position requires me to acknowledge your existence, and much worse, give you the occasional time of day. But that time had come to a close. Goodbye."

Prince Blueblood huffed, standing tall. "You have no place to complain. It is *I* who should…"

"Oh, I'm not complaining," Rarity's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I'm whining. If I was *complaining,* it would suggest there is a higher authority to complain to. But there is not; I am the highest authority within this Ministry. Observe."

Rarity trotted to her desk and pushed a button with her hoof. "Oooh guards!"

She turned to smile at the unicorn stallion as the double doors at the end of the room swung open and two guard ponies appeared. Prince Blueblood backpedaled, startled. "Please escort the prince off the property. If he resists, arrest him."

I would have enjoyed the show had my host not backed away, heart beating slightly faster. She turned our head and I felt my teeth biting down on the object strapped to her side. It was the hilt of a sheathed blade, and the zebra silently drew it.

The guards did as the Ministry Mare requested. Prince Blueblood showed enough intelligence to not resist. I had hoped that once they were gone, my host would re-sheath her blade, but the zebra clearly had other plans.

We were alone with Rarity in her office. And she couldn't see us.

"Unbelievable!" she nickered, echoing my previous thought. The elder unicorn had her back to us, her head lowered as she focused on something on her desk as my host began to creep closer.

No! I tried to shout a warning.

The zebra turned her head, aiming the blade for the back of Rarity's neck, right in the lush of her mane. I could feel my host tense for the strike. Rarity shifted slightly, her horn glowing as one of the gems on the front of her desk slid aside, revealing a secret lock that demanded her attention.

Please no!

I felt something shift in the zebra's saddle-pouch. A new weight. Suddenly, frantically, my host backed up. I heard the detonation, felt a brutal pressure and a searing pain, then nothing. My host fell. Unmoving save for a twitching she could barely feel. It was as if her entire body had gone numb.

"Simply unbelievable," reiterated Rarity as she elegantly turned, staring at where we had collapsed invisibly on the floor.

I heard more than felt the cloak being pulled off of my host, glowing in a blue magical field that mirrored the soft light tracing the spirals around Rarity's horn. The moment it was removed, both the cloak and my host became visible. Rarity paid us no attention, floating the cloak to her and flipping the rough fabric about until she found the gemstone clasp.

"There you are, my pretty," she said, telekinetically ripping the gemstone free, breaking the clasp in the process. "Oh don't you have some interesting magic," she said as she appraised the gem, tossing the rest of the cloak aside. "Twi will love taking a closer look at you!"

I realized I was seeing the inception of StealthBucks.

I recalled a message I had found in a recruitment center: *Intelligence suggested that the zebras had developed invisibility spell fetishes, but* ***this*** *looks like something designed by the*

Ministry of Magic. In the pervading paranoia of late wartime Equestria, somepony had feared the worst, not knowing what Twilight Sparkle knew. But the zebra's hadn't gotten this magic from us; we had gotten it from them.

The long, wicked blade lay on the carpet where it had fallen, close yet impossibly out of reach. My host tried to move towards it, but her body wouldn't respond.

"I slipped a stun grenade into your saddle-pouch," Rarity informed us, moving the gemstone out of sight. "I like to think I'm rather expert at manipulating cloth. Even if I can't see it."

The zebra shuffled closer to the blade.

"Really?" Rarity said with a lady-like scoff. She floated the blade away, turning a disdainful gaze on us. "A zebra assassin attempted to infiltrate my office and murder me concealed under a cloak with an enchanted gemstone?"

She leaned closer, "I'd explain how I got my cutie mark, but it wouldn't do you any good where you're going."

Another cocoon of blue light wrapped around a headset on her desk and floated it over her head, gently sliding it into place around her ears and muzzle.

"Although I do have to wonder, were you trying to assassinate one of 'Nightmare Moon's' cabinet?" she asked, turning her tail to us as she slid open the hidden compartment in her desk. "Or were you after *this?"*

Rarity cantered to face us. Floating in front of her was a powerful, dark tome bound in twisted black hide.

The moment I saw the book, I knew it held so many secrets. So many things just waiting for me to unlock if I could only look at the pages.

"Well, I suppose we'll find out, won't we?" Rarity promised.

She lifted a hoof to the headset, her expression instantly changing to one of barely-bridled joy. "Oooh Piiiinkie Pie! This is Rarity. I've got a present for you!" She smiled. "You'll love this one."

* * *

I came to on a worn, musty cot in Calamity's shack. Velvet Remedy was laying on the floor, panting and soaked in sweat. Calamity himself stood towering over me, shadowed from the light coming through the window over the workbench behind him.

"What happened, Li'lpip?"

"Where?" I blinked, looking around. "What…?"

"Ya made it all the way up," Calamity asserted. "Ah saw ya do it. But we were most o' the way up when ya screamed, thrashin' like ya were on fire, and flung yerself from the porch!"

"I fell?" My eyes went wide. I turned, looking around. The door to the shack was open. I blinked as the image of The Black Book swam in front of me – much like having turned away after staring at a bright light and seeing the shape of the light dance before your eyes. But nothing in a visited memory had ever left such an imprint *outside* of the experience.

I blinked, clearing my vision. I could see the porch were I had been laying. The memory orb was nowhere in sight.

"Darn tootin' ya fell!" Calamity retorted. "We had a helluva time getting' ya up here, even after ya went limp. Been worried sick. What the hell happened?"

"I…" I looked towards the empty porch again. My instinct was to lie. But there wasn't a lie that wouldn't end up worrying my friends needlessly. "I made a mistake. While I was waiting, I touched a memory orb. Only it was damaged…"

"Ya did *what?"* Calamity snapped. "On the porch? Li'lpip, Ah barely caught ya!"

I cringed back, staring up at my pegasus friend, my hooves pushing at the cloth on his cot as my back thumped softly against the wall.

"Y'know, it's hard 'nuff flyin' while carryin' one pony. Ah can't do it wi' two when the second one is buckin' an' screamin' like she's bein' eaten from the inside out!" Calamity lashed out. Unpleasant nightmares about parasprites washed through my mind. "Ya nearly brought us all down! Velvet Remedy had t' use her magic t' carry ya. And Ah'll remind ya that she ain't nearly as good at that spell as y'all are!"

I turned a nervous look to Velvet. She was so exhausted that she could barely return my gaze.

"An' don'tcha think after all she's been through last night, tha maybe she didn't deserve for ya to make us all scared t' death that yer dyin' from somethin' in the smoke?"

Oh Goddess. The weight of what I'd thoughtlessly done to them crushed down on me. I started to shake. The hurt from my shame and Calamity's righteous anger broke the floodgates, and suddenly the emotional deluge of the last half a week consumed me. The horrors of Fillydelphia slavery, The Pit, the threat to Homage, the slaughter at Stable Two, my mother…

"I'm sorry!" I yelled back, bursting into tears. "I fucked up! It was horrible! I'm sorry!"

"Galdangit, Li'lpip!" Calamity growled back angrily, "Yer curiosity is gonna get ya killed one o' these days. An' t'day ya nearly took alla us with ya!"

"I'm sorry!"

Calamity snorted, glowering, as I broke into sobs. Velvet Remedy, trembled, huffing as she got to her feet, and moved closer to me, pulling herself onto the cot with a painful effort.

"Okay," Calamity insisted. "Ground rules. From now on, ya don't play with one o' those things unless yer on the ground, out of combat, somewhere's safe. *And* ya have one o' us watchin' over ya."

Having laid the law, Calamity allowed his expression to soften. His own utter exhaustion finally showed through his eyes. He gently wrapped me with a wing.

The two of them stayed with me until the tempest passed.

"Now buck up, Li'lpip," Calamity finally said, prodding me with his wing. "Ya gonna have a look at that floor safe or not?"

I nodded, although for the first time I really didn't feel right allowing my curiosity to be sated. I slid slowly from the cot and looked at the floor beneath it.

It was, at most, an average lock. Even in my distress, I could open it easily, with or without tools. The safe clicked open.

Amongst the saddlebag's worth of decayed personal effects, one item sat gleaming and unblemished by time. A statuette of Rainbow Dash. Her pose was powerful, wings spread and a huge grin on her face…

“Go ahead,” Calamity said softly. “Take it. Ah know ya collect those things.”

“But… don’t you want it?” I asked, surprised.

“Ah already got her cutie mark burned inta muh flanks. Ah figure she’s already close ’nuff t’ me.”

I nodded, then carefully reached out with my magic, experiencing a sudden surge as my magic touched the statuette. I was… better. I felt like I could *be* better than I had been before. Do anything. Nimbler, more graceful… but much more than that. I was, in a word, *cooler.*

The inscription was what Rainbow Dash’s inscription had to be:

“Be Awesome!”

* * *

Calamity stepped out of his shack and into the oddly reddish-orange air. He was encased in the terrifying black carapace of his old Enclave armor. The tips of his four Novasurge rifles glistened wickedly. He tested his wings and the scorpion tail.

Then he lowered his head and hoofed off the helmet. He looked back up, letting the smoky wind catch in his orange mane. He looked weird without his hat on.

“Forget it,” he huffed with a stomp. “Ah’m not goin’ ’round like this.” He turned and trotted back into the shack. “Ah’d rather be shot.”

It took him less that a minute to shuck the armor. Velvet Remedy wrapped it in her magic, making sure to also collect his helmet from the porch. “Well, at least take it with us. You may change your mind when you see whatever forces Red Eye has around Tenpony Tower.”

“Fine,” he grumped. “Ah’ve grabbed everythin’ Ah want. Let’s just go.”

I paused. “Calamity? I know you are hoping to sell a bunch of those slavers’ weapons up at Tenpony, but I really think we should give them to Ditzy Doo. You know, as a thank you for what she did for Stable Two.”

Velvet Remedy neighed. “That would be a rather impersonal gift, Littlepip. And possibly a painful one, considering what slavers have done to her.” I frowned, wincing. “Besides, do you really want to give New Appleloosa more weapons right now?” I had to admit that I did not.

Instead, Velvet Remedy looked to Calamity, “Do you know anything that Ditzy Doo likes? I agree with Littlepip: we do need to give her a gift, something to show our thanks for her help.”

“Well,” Calamity thought. “She likes muffins…”

Velvet looked shocked. “Can ghouls even eat?” Apparently, they didn’t have to, but they could.

I smiled. Between Homage and Xenith, we had the best cooks in the Equestrian Wasteland.

* * *

I spent most of the ride trying not to think about anything that had happened recently. I knew that if I did, I’d start crying again.

Instead, I tried to focus on the discussions between the Outcasts, but they delved into internal Steel Ranger politics, and I felt my attention drifting. Knight Strawberry Lemonade sat next to me, chiming into the older members' conversations at every opportunity.

Strawberry Lemonade, I thought, sounds delicious.

I groaned, catching myself before my imagination went too far south. I needed Homage. I looked over the side of the passenger wagon. Twilight was spreading across the wasteland as we approached Fetlock. Below I spotted the mostly-collapsed ruins of that first cottage, but the wandering merchant and his mechanical owl had moved on.

As we approached Fetlock, I spotted the faint column of smoke raising up from the ponyhole that lead to Stable Twenty-Nine. More curled up from nearby drainage grates. There were no sounds of fighting.

"This is either very good," SteelHooves commented, "Or very bad."

As we drew closer, a Steel Ranger moved out of the shadows. There was a flash of light. I ducked, expecting impact.

But it hadn't been a weapon. It was a flare.

"Thank Applejack," I thought I heard SteelHooves mutter. It was good news.

I let out a breath. It was about time the Equestrian Wasteland threw us a break.

⁂

Our luck continued to hold as we glided through the night over the Manehattan ruins. As we approached the top of Tenpony Tower, I could see the firelights from Red Eye's camps below, ringing the tower on the ground and lighting up the Celestia Line. They had taken the exterior of the Four Stars station.

Griffins flew in patterns around the tower, but they flew low, looking for targets on the ground. I realized with a start that Red Eye didn't know about the *Sky Bandit.* He knew we had a pegasus, so he could suspect we had faster transport. But he had to allow for the possibility that we were walking. And if that were true, we'd barely be making Manehattan now if we traveled here straight from Fillydelphia.

We had time.

We had a problem. There was an alicorn perched on the roof of Tenpony Tower. Her shield was down, all the better to spot incoming Littlepips. I could shoot her. The silenced zebra rifle would more than do the trick. But the moment she went down, every alicorn in the area would know. And there was a good chance Red Eye would too.

The passenger wagon lurched hard. "Aww crap," Calamity grunted as we began to sink out of the sky. The spark batteries were drained. And our poor pegaus was too exhausted to handle the sudden change in weight. He nearly fainted from the strain. We began to plummet.

Frantically, I concentrated on wrapping the *Sky Bandit* with my magic. If I could pull myself through the air, maybe I could slow or even reverse our fall.

My horn flared brightly. The strain hit me like a shock, buckling my legs, reminding me that I hadn't slept in over a day.

We were still falling.

I pushed harder, gasping, my body trembling. A layer of overglow burst from my horn. Sparks started to shoot from its tip.

The glow around the *Sky Bandit* became brilliant. It attracted the attention of one of the griffins below as we plummeted towards their patrol line. The griffin turned towards us, lifting her sniper rifle, and fired.

Now everyone would know we are here. But I couldn't focus on that. I was pouring everything I had into trying to slow our descent. A second overglow wrapped my horn. Beams of light shot out of it.

We began to slow.

"Aw hell," Calamity moaned weakly, all but collapsed in the harness, as the alicorn took off from the roof, diving towards us as she put up her shield.

I screamed, somehow tapping into strength I didn't have (Be Strong! Be Unwavering! Be Awesome!). A third layer of overglow erupted from my horn. The *Sky Bandit* stopped abruptly, hovering in the air.

Then we began to ascend.

The alicorn's eyes widened and she stopped her descent. Her glowing horn began to crackle with electricity as she prepared to cast a bolt of lightning at us.

The griffin shot again. This time, the bullet hit the wagon, leaving a small hole in the roof. The griffin began to reload, and was engulfed in green flame. Pyrelight hooted happily and swooped back up after us.

Velvet Remedy tossed her shield around the *Sky Bandit.* The first bolt of lightning struck it and the shield imploded, but it kept us from being hit. Part of my mind realized that the shock from a strike would obliterate my concentration and we would fall to our deaths.

The alicorn was flying upwards, back towards the roof, keeping a distance between herself and us as her horn crackled again with electricity.

Pyrelight landed next to Velvet Remedy, looking proud.

Xenith had shattered another flask on the floor and was stomping in it. As the second bolt lashed out, the zebra grabbed my mane in her teeth and pulled me onto her back. The powerful electrical bolt hit the *Sky Bandit,* arcing all about the metal frame. Velvet let out a lady-like squeal and collapsed. Pyrelight squawked and tumbled to the floor of the passenger wagon.

Xenith and I remained unharmed, protected by her insulating potion. We continued to rise. There was nothing else we could do.

The alicorn landed back on the edge of the roof. Motes of magic began to form in a ring about her, forming into eldritch darts.

From somewhere on the rooftop, a lashing beam of cosmic energy struck the alicorn, rippling the shield where it pushed through to strike the monster directly. The shield imploded as the alicorn was reduced to luminescent, moon-colored ash.

I floated the *Sky Bandit* onto the rooftop. Homage was waiting there for us, the alien weapon floating by her side. As soon as she saw me, she galloped into the passenger wagon and wrapped me in a hug.

Homage!

I could smell her, feel her soft coat and the warmth of her body. My own relaxed in her embrace, and once more, I began to cry.

"A zebra!" Homage squealed happily. Xenith cringed back as Homage offered her hoof.

"She… doesn't like being touched," I told the sexy grey unicorn. Homage lowered her hoof and nodded.

"And who might you be?" Xenith asked, prompting introductions.

Inspiration hit me. "Homage, would you allow…" I paused. "Could you ask DJ Pon3 if Xenith could spend some time in the M.A.S.E.B.S.?"

Homage and Xenith both looked at me curiously. "Please?" I asked Homage.

"I-I'm sure it could be arranged," Homage said trustingly.

I turned to my zebra friend. "DJ Pon3 has cameras all over the Equestrian Wasteland. Maybe one of them has seen your daughter or her tribe?

The zebra's eyes widened. I saw a glimmer of hope.

Homage smiled. "Yes, please. And I'm sure I can get DJ Pon3 to let you peek at some of the archived footage. I'll show you how to do so, then leave you in private." She blushed a little, "Littlepip and I are going to be busy, but we won't be far away."

"She likes spankings and bondage," Velvet told Homage in a conspiratorial, overly-loud whisper.

I stared at her, wide-eyed, blushing hotly. "That's not true!"

Homage raised an eyebrow. "Did you two talk about liking bondage and spankings?" she asked innocently.

"No. I mean yes, but…"

"Oh," Homage feigned understanding, "So you talked about Velvet liking bondage?"

"No, me. But…" Aw crap.

"So you do like it!" Homage was grinning way too much. I gave up, hanging my head and accepting my doomed-ness.

I narrowed my eyes, whispering to the charcoal-coated mare, "All those times I fantasized about you? That was before I learned you were evil."

"Don't worry," Homage said, wrapping a foreleg about me as she smiled, her eyes twinkling as she glanced to Velvet. "Last time, I learned you were multi-orgasmic. Tonight I'm going to find out just how many you can have before you pass out." She nibbled one of my ears. "Then I'm going to find out if I can wake you up with one. So… some bondage might be required."

I felt myself flooding with heat and embarrassment. I simultaneously wanted to both let her tie me up and do whatever she desired… and to run away and hide under a rock forever. I swayed, feeling faint and nearly fell over. Delicately, Homage maneuvered me towards the rooftop door.

"Wow," Xenith said, standing with the others as we walked away, her exotic voice gaining a touch of melancholy. "With all your teasing, I was beginning to feel sorry for the little one. Now I just feel jealous."

"Yes," Velvet Remedy agreed, sounding a touch stunned. "So do I." She turned to Calamity. "No offense."

"Offense? Hell, *Ah* feel jealous."

Homage snickered. Then turned to the others. "Are you coming?"

I stopped, at first thinking that she was inviting them to watch. That… I couldn't possibly… no!

But Homage had less cruel plans. "I've arranged for the rest of you to have the same suite as before. It's all taken care of."

* * *

Velvet Remedy and Calamity had taken their leave, Velvet mentioning something about dragging the poor pegasus buck to the spa. Homage, Xenith and I were left alone in the room with the huge alicorn water fountain.

As physically exhausted, emotionally gutted, and achingly horny as I was, I could not seek attention for my needs until others had been met. First came getting Xenith set up in the Emergency Broadcast Station. Xenith's eyes went even wider as she took in the walls of monitor screens. Many still flickered and suffered distorted images, but I saw all of them were working.

"This is… amazing," the zebra breathed. "What is this place?"

Homage told her, adding, "The images you see are from the spire towers like the one in Fillydelphia. Until just over three days ago, the ones from Fillydelphia were dark. Red Eye is using that tower for something and it was keeping me from getting a signal. But thanks to Littlepip, DJ Pon3 now has eyes in the heart of slaver territory too." Homage gave Xenith a sympathetic and hopeful smile. "We'll finally be able to start doing some real good out there."

The zebra nodded. For the next hour, Homage instructed the zebra in the camera controls and accessing the archives. Xenith took to it with difficulty. In the meantime, I mostly just watched. In Homage's home, I finally felt safe. I was no longer on edge, no longer running or fighting, and my body kept trying to fall asleep.

I did however, manage to get a promise of muffins from both of them. Ditzy Doo would soon be getting the biggest and best muffin delivery in the history of the Equestrian Wasteland.

Then, finally, Homage and I were alone together in the foyer, standing next to the fountain.

"And what shall I do with you, my Wasteland Heroine?" Homage purred. "First, I mean."

"Homage," I said reluctantly. "We need to talk."

"Oh my. Sounds serious."

I nodded. Falling to my haunches, I began to talk. I started with the truth about SteelHooves and Chief Grim Star, apologizing profusely for having not told her sooner. Homage's expression was troubled but forgiving.

Then I told her of Red Eye and the megaspell.

"We have to evacuate the tower," I said finally. "Quickly, and stealthily."

"We can't leave Tenpony Tower," Homage said, shaking her head.

"I know they have you surrounded. But maybe with the *Sky Bandit*… or though the tunnels?" I fretted. "It can't be impossible."

Homage shook her head again. "No. Some of the population, maybe. But even then, I can't leave here. We can't let Red Eye take this place."

"I know DJ Pon3 is important, but he's not as important as your life." She couldn't understand that, of course. But I had seen the *Gardens of Equestria.* I *knew.*

"Then you seriously underestimate the need for a voice of truth and hope in this ruined world," Homage told me. "DJ Pon3 gives the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland the warnings and advice they need to survive. But more than that, he gives them comfort and the hope they need to make surviving worthwhile."

I looked away and nodded, feeling ashamed. She was right.

"And while I would say DJ Pon3 is the most vital thing we need to preserve and protect here, he is not the only treasure in this tower."

I looked up in surprise. This was new.

Homage brushed my hair tenderly even as her own blue mane fell into her eyes. "Littlepip, love," she said, that word shooting thrills through me, igniting desires and dreams. "Tenpony Tower was a prominent hub for the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. It's not a hotel or a mall. There are secrets here."

"Secrets?" I asked, that damnably curious pony in my head perking at the mere idea. "What sort of secrets?" I could tell Homage was debating whether or not to tell me. But only for a moment.

"Littlepip, did you ever wonder how I could stay here, DJ Pon3's public assistant, when the stuffy lot in this place despise him so?" I had to admit the question had never occurred to me.

"There is a secret society within Tenpony Tower. They are the ones who, I dare say, are really in charge." She backed up and looked around. "There are places in this building that are sealed off from the general public. Places were the Ministry's secrets played out. All manner of magical research and development."

She looked at me, tossing her hair out of her eyes. "You know that annoying shield spell the alicorns all have? It was developed *here.*"

I found myself looking up at the age-darkened bronze statue. The alicorn in the room.

"And you haven't seen how powerful that spell can get if you pump enough power into it," Homage told me. "The only reason the alicorn shields can be punched through with the right firepower is because they can't manifest it at anywhere near full power."

"Actually," I said, remembering the super-charged alicorn from the Fillydelphia Crater flying through the building, her shield tearing apart walls and supports, "I think I have."

Homage bade me to tell her about it. Once I was done, she nodded, visibly shaken. "I think you're right," she admitted.

Homage continued, "In the weeks before the end, one of the other hubs in the Ministry of Arcane Science cracked some sort of sub-spell that they used to enhance the shield spell," she continued. "Not make it more powerful, but make it so that specially designated ponies could pass through a shield as if it wasn't there. They started creating enchanted shield generators, placing them inside rooms or sections of buildings that they wanted secure."

With that, Homage hopped up onto the fountain's rim and tapped her right forehoof rhythmically on the alicorn statue. I gasped as the horn flared with magic and the glowing aura of a magical shield swept over the walls. "The M.A.S.E.B.S. and Twilight's Athenaeum are amongst Tenpony Tower's sealed areas," she said with a smile. "To the population below, DJ Pon3 has always been a strange hermit living in part of the tower that no pony can get to, always dealing with the outside world through intermediaries."

My jaw dropped.

"Once started, the only way to turn off the shield was from inside, and the only ponies who could get inside were those designated by the sub-spell…"

"Bypass Spells," I said, slowly re-closing my jaw. Homage gave me a quizzical look. "The sub-spell, it's called a Bypass. Twilight Sparkle reverse-engineered it from a zebra enchantment." Like the StealthBucks, I thought. *Shield screens that let specific materials through* my flank.

Dammit.

I was going to have to kill the Goddess for Red Eye after all. Not only was it the only way to protect Homage and the ponies of Tenpony Tower, it was the only way to keep him from taking too close a look at this place.

"Could we move all the ponies of the tower into the shielded areas?" I asked.

"Not for long," Homage answered. "And I don't think it would do much good. If that Balefire bomb goes off, it will take out the foundation and everything not protected. All the shielding in Equestria won't save us from the fall."

Glumly, she admitted, "The shields that were used to protect the whole building haven't worked since the first one."

"I know," I told her, recounting how a wrong turn in the basement had brought me to the room full of generators. I didn't mention the maintenance pony who had died from shrapnel when the megaspell overloaded them and they all exploded.

Another realization struck me. "Red Eye is researching a way to trick a Bypass," I warned her. If these shields were being used to house the most vital research of at least one of the Ministries… what could he be after? Was it here? "He hadn't had much success yet, but he's got ponies working on it."

Homage frowned. "Not good." She hopped down from the fountain. "Thank you for the warning, Littlepip." She approached me, "Problem is, there already is a way to trick a… Bypass, right?"

I nodded.

"The Bypass works on genetics. And it's not as accurate as the Ministry of Arcane Sciences thought. Close family members of the designated ponies, or even a direct descendant of them, can get through a Bypass. That's how I can get in here even if the shields are up." Homage looked back at the alicorn and then to me.

"The shields in Tenpony Tower were set to allow only Twilight Sparkle and the three highest ranking unicorns in the Manehattan M.A.S. hub to pass through. Turns out, I'm a direct descendant of one of those high-ranking unicorns," she revealed to me. "Just like the ponies who actually control Tenpony Tower. That's why they want me here." Homage added cautiously, "As long as I don't make *too* many waves."

Oh. Oh wow.

"I'll admit, I've been talking you up a lot. And I think I'm finally getting the others to come around. It won't be long before I can put the special resources of this tower at your hooves." Homage smiled sweetly. "Let me give you the *extended* tour."

* * *

Shield spells had only been the start. Homage guided me through one concealed hallway and shielded chamber after another, turning off the shields for me and restoring them in our wake.

We walked into a large, multi-cornered ritual chamber, bleached brightest white. The floor was an intricate mosaic of white-on-white tiles in exquisite and arcane patterns. There was a mirrored chimney leading up to a skylight, looking up into the darkness of the clouds above.

"What is this?"

"This," Homage revealed, "Is a megaspell chamber."

I stumbled. "Wait… you can cast megaspells here?"

Homage giggled. "Yes and no. You can cast a specific megaspell in here. If you had enough unicorns who all knew the spell. Each megaspell chamber is keyed to a specific spell, apparently."

I nodded, my mouth suddenly dry. "How many… megaspell chambers… does Tenpony Tower have?"

"Just this one," Homage admitted sadly. "And it's useless."

"Useless?'

Homage moved over to one of the chamber's thirty-two corners. She floated up an audio machine. "I found this in the recording studio. Apparently, it never got around to editing."

Homage started the machine, and hauntingly peaceful music flowed out, plucked and strummed from a deep-sounding harp. I closed my eyes and found myself swaying to the music. It was mysterious, unlike anything I had heard before.

"I try to pull this out once a year for a late night broadcast. I love it, but it's totally not DJ Pon3."

I nodded, wanting her to shut up. I was enjoying the music. It was speaking to me, touching on the sorrows of the last week, but without making me hurt.

The music ended in a rippling wave of sound that slowly reverberated away.

I heard a voice from the recording, sounding like somepony speaking through the recording studio's intercom.

> *"That was beautiful, Lyra. Next, let's try…"*

But an argument in the background, at first almost too quiet to hear, was quickly growing louder. From inside the recording chamber, the voice of a mare whom I assumed to by Lyra, spoke up.

> *"What's going on?"*
>
> *"um… You didn't hear this from me, but Twilight Sparkle's gone the last three days without sleep, trying to prepare for the Princess's inspection, and has been in supreme bitchy mode all day today. I suggest steering clear. Don't worry. I don't think she'll come in here."*

The arguing voices outside the recording studio were getting loud enough and close enough to make out the words.

> *"…Well that's just great, Twilight. Now she's in the bathroom sobbing her eyes out."*
>
> *"Well, I'm sorry. But those results are just unacceptable. I can't go to the Princess and tell her that we've put her name on a megaspell that's… that's useless!"*

The ponies in the recording studio had fallen completely silent. The argument was just outside their door. Twilight Sparkle and a male voice that sounded vaguely familiar.

"There's better ways of handling it than grabbing a pony, pointing and saying 'Look, there are all the thousands and thousands of bodies of ponies who are dead because your spell sucks. Explain it to them.' Just how the hell was that supposed to help?"

"Don't you get it, Spike? The zebras have megaspell-tipped missiles. Hundreds of them. If they launch them, those missiles will reach Equestria from the zebra homeland within minutes. And this Celestia One, or Celestia Prime, or whatever they're calling it can't even be cast unless it's sunny. I can't tell the Princess that the only defense we have against those missiles can be defeated by a cloudy day. What if the zebras decide to attack us at night?"

"…"

"You know what? Forget it, Twilight. I'm going to take a nap. And frankly, you should too."

"You're always taking a nap. There's work to be done"

"Whatever. Wake me when the Twilight I know and love has decided to visit. Until then, I don't even want to speak to you."

"Urrgh. Fine."

* * *

"In here," Homage said, waving a hoof at a sprawling agricultural bay, "We discovered that the Ministry of Arcane Sciences had perfected spells that purified water, cleaned radiation, even purged taint." I boggled. If only that maddened ghoul doctor had known. What he killed so many to accomplish…

"Unfortunately," Homage informed me, "The spells only work on an extremely small scale. With a lot of effort, we could purge one tree, the fruit becoming ripe and succulent and perfect for consumption… but there's nothing to keep the poisons from just seeping back in, and the area affected is so small it would take an army of unicorns to clean enough of a field to grow a garden without having to worry about the soil going bad before harvest. But it makes for wonderful potted plants."

"But, if you could cast it everywhere, all at once. Purge everything…" I realized what I was seeing. These were components of the *Gardens of Equestria.*

"I'd say you were delusional, but I'm talking to my Littlepip. I know better."

It was time to tell her.

When I was done, Homage collapsed weakly. "Me?" She looked at me, as if pleading for me to renounce the truth. "The… salvation of all of Equestria… is on me?"

I nodded. "You. Ditzy Doo. Four others. We don't know who yet."

"This spell… it will fix everything?"

"Pretty much," I nodded. "But there's things that need to be done first. I'm not the Wasteland Savior, Homage. You are. You and them." I gave her a bittersweet smile. "I'm just the one who clears the way."

Homage stared at me for a long time. Then pushed herself up. "I need a drink…"

* * *

Screw my mother and screw my vulnerability to addictions. We were back in the

Athenaeum, and Homage was drowning herself in apple whiskey and I was right there beside her, soused to the… whatever it is that ponies get soused to.

"…And then," Homage slurred, continuing a tale that had blurred into another tale which had jumped off from the original story about four stories back, "Jokeblue says, 'pfft, big deal. You've got *one box* that's bigger inside than outside. Well, *Mister* Whooves, I've got four little saddle bags, and I can carry about thirty rifles in them and more ammo than you can shake a hoof at. Hell, you should see how many rakes I can cram into my toolbox back home.'" Homage thumped down the apple whiskey bottle on the table for emphasis.

I paused, waving my hooves as I tried to measure my imagination. I was drunk and probably missing something, because there was no way a rake could fit in a toolbox. I finally gave up, deciding it must be a joke.

"Jokeblue's a funny name. How'd she get that?"

Homage became more somber, although no more sober. "Birth defect. Her mother was hit by killing joke while pregnant. Lucky either of them lived."

"Ah," I said, not really understanding, but reaching out a comforting hoof anyway. It seemed the right thing to do, even though I ended up knocking over several of the apple whiskey bottles. Fortunately, most of them were empty.

A memory struck me and I began to cry again.

"Lit… pip? What is it?"

With a shuddering breath, I recounted, "I shot one of the Steel Rangers. In the back of the head. I think it was the one who killed my old mentor, but… I'm not sure."

"Well, sounds like the bitch deserved it. Sounds like all of the Steel Rangers did."

"Yes, I know… but I just snuck up and shot her. And kept shooting. Even after she was dead. Until I'd emptied Little Macintosh into her corpse." My breast heaved with a shudder. "I… I don't like the pony I'm becoming. I think I'm losing myself." My voice hitched. "Monterey Jack was right. I'm running out of me left to save."

Homage was by my side. I didn't remember her leaving her chair. For the second time that night, she held me as I began to cry.

She gently led me towards her bed. "Come here, Littlepip. Rest now."

* * *

If Red Eye had any problem with me staying at Tenpony Tower, he did nothing to show it. Even the loss of the alicorn and griffin seemed to go unnoticed. I knew that should worry me. Instead, I ignored it. Instead, I relaxed. I even went to the spa with Homage. Twice.

I didn't want to think of myself as a selfish pony; but fuck Red Eye, I needed this. And hadn't I earned at least a little of it? Maybe not, considering my mistakes – the damaged memory orb, the really stupid battle plans, going behind The Wall alone. But if I didn't then my companions certainly did.

I had hoped Xenith and Homage would get along. But while Homage seemed to like the zebra, Xenith maintained a thankful but remote demeanor, even a touch frosty. It made the muffin-baking sessions in the kitchen awkward enough that I spent that time in the library, sitting at the table, researching and reading.

I had just finished a comparative reading of the library's unabridged version of *Applied Gemstones* with my own and was staring up at the huge painting of Splendid Valley when Xenith trotted in.

"Any luck finding your daughter?" I asked, trying to sound casual as I reminded her what an exceptional and unique tool Homage had put at the zebra's disposal.

"Yes and no," Xenith replied. "I have seen signs of her tribe. They have been living in the foothills beneath the Canterlot Ruins." She quickly added, "Safely outside the Cloud. But I have seen no sign of my daughter. Still, I thank you for this…"

"You should be thanking Homage."

"I have."

"Then why do you act so… cold around her?"

The zebra contemplated me. Judged me. Then finally said, "Did you not see the weapon she used? Your lover had been touched by the stars. She is cursed. No good can come of her."

Xenith walked out.

Well fuck. It would seem that even now there was no reasoning with a zebra when it came to that nonsense. I was probably lucky I didn't step in any Star-spawn blood or she might think I was cursed too.

"There's no such thing as curses!" I called out after her in frustration.

With a deep sigh, I buried my head in the scattering of books.

A few minutes later, Homage strode in, a puff of muffin batter on her nose. "Now then," she whispered huskily as she wrapped her forelegs around me. I flushed, feeling a pleasant, uncontrolled fluttering wash over my body like I'd fallen into a bed of butterflies. "Where was I?" That fluttering coalesced in my nether regions, becoming very warm and joyfully difficult to bear. "Twenty… three, wasn't it?"

Oh my Goddesses! She was actually counting!

* * *

The *Sky Bandit* cut through the air as we approached Splendid Valley. The sky was crisp and slightly stained with smoke. The valley below was a rocky wasteland completely barren of life.

Scattered small holes were the only warnings that the caves beneath were home to dozens, if not hundreds, of the most dangerous monsters in all of Equestria. Hellhounds.

I floated out my binoculars and stared towards the horizon. A sinkhole several miles across indicated where the balefire bomb had been detonated. The bomb had been snuck in underground and detonated. The surface above had collapsed into the toxin-filled tunnels below.

Over the last two hundered years, the sinkhole had weathered and eroded into a wide crater. It glowed faintly, even in the daylight. It was marked with hundreds of holes.

On the cusp of the crater, I saw the crumbled walls of the Maripony. Once a station for gem mining, the building had more in common with Shattered Hoof than any of the Ministry Hubs that I had seen. It could have passed for a fortress, but a devastated one. The explosion and sinkhole had torn away part of the foundation, and crumbled the rest. About a third of the building had collapsed into the crater. The rest had suffered a megaquake.

"Whoa nelly! If the Goddess done survived that, Ah reckon she prob'ly earned two-hundred years o' livin'."

"What is the plan, little one?" Xenith asked.

"Plan?" Velvet Remedy chuckled, "I think Littlepip's just planning to go in there and shoot her."

My friends had all spent the last couple days in much-needed recovery, as had I. Despite the mounting hopelessness of our mission, everyone was well rested and back in form. If I was going to fail and die, I was happy it would be like this. With these ponies.

No, wait. Zebras weren't ponies. With these *people.*

"Well, then it's a darn good thing Ah sold all those guns an' bought us plenty o' ammo. Even managed t' get some enchanted ones for Li'l Macintosh. Don't know if they're enchanted wi' Goddess-slayin', but we c'n hope."

I checked my PipBuck and brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. I checked the date and time. "Ditzy Doo should be getting her muffins about now." I smiled to Xenith. "Thanks for your help with that. I'm sure she'll love them."

It struck me that when Xenith and I had walked across the moat and outside The Wall, I had been in the Equestrian Wasteland for just over five weeks. Now it was nearly six. Six weeks from apprentice PipBuck Technician to would-be deity-slayer.

"My life is surreal."

Velvet Remedy leaned close. "So, how high did you get to?"

I blushed hotly and buried my face in my forearms.

"Look sharp," Calamity called out. "Incoming at high eight!"

My head shot up. I pulled up the binoculars again. Five glowing orbs, alicorn shields, were heading towards us from Maripony.

"Dammit, Ah shoulda worn that damn Enclave gear after all," Calamity cursed. "Li'lpip, reassemble Spitfire's Thunder. We're in for a bumpy ride!"

I levitated the magically-augmented anti-machine rifle from Calamity's holster and began putting it together.

Four midnight-blue alicorns suddenly appeared, flanking us.

"The stars curse me to a thousand rapes by the horn of Nightmare Moon," Xenith whispered next to me, shocking me nearly as much as the alicorn's arrival.

"You've been around Littlepip too long," Velvet suggested, floating out her shotgun. The alicorns were already casting their shields.

{{WELCOME TO THE HOME OF THE GODDESS!}}

The voice boomed in my head, reverberating with is own echoes.

"Oh…" Velvet moaned, wavering. "This is not good."

{{PUT AWAY YOUR PUNY WEAPONS AND COME! YOU ARE MY GUESTS! FOR I, THE GODDESS, HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM YOU!}}

Oh no. Nonononono!

"Iffin she ain't got nothin' t' fear from us, why the show? Hell, why not jus' send us packin'?"

Xenith looked between the three of us. "What are you speaking of?"

But I knew. Oh by the Goddesses – the real ones – I knew.

Heavily, I said, "Because she wants us to do something for her."

We were guided into the crumbling building. As we landed, we saw at least three dozen more alicorns standing about the crumbling ruins. In a single movement, in perfect unity, they all turned their heads to look at us.

It was the unparalleled creepiest thing in the history of *ever.*

Escorted through the doors by the four midnight-blue alicorns. They had dropped their shields. Honestly, they didn't need them. We were totally outmatched.

I was surprised when the alicorns brought us to what looked like a security substation within the building. This room seemed largely undamaged, save by time. The rest of the rooms and hallways we had seen were broken and crumbling, fragmented by the subterranean blast and eroded by centuries and weather. This small room was almost… intact.

There was no Goddess here. There was nothing here but some chairs, a bank of four dusty monitors and a microphone, a filing cabinet and a few ridiculously pristine coffee cups. The area above the monitors was glass, but the long window looked out at nothing but a metal wall inches away. The opposite wall held a recessed door. There were odd grooves on the wall.

"Ah reckon this is our cell," Calamity said. If so, it would be stifling. And cramped, if any of the alicorns tried to stay in here with us.

{{WE WILL TALK! BUT FIRST, THE GODDESS WISHES YOU TO SEE! TO UNDERSTAND, AND MARVEL!}}

The voice of the Goddess didn't merely reverberate, I realized. It *pre*-verberated. Like there were dozens of smaller, weaker voices inside that voice, all trying to say the same thing at the same time, and not quite succeeding. The voice of the Goddess was a chorus.

"Understand what?" Velvet Remedy asked. Xenith looked at her, confused.

{{THE GODDESS!!}}

The security monitors flickered to life under the dust. One of them displayed colorful ponies in lab coats milling about a much bigger version of this room, full of monitors and maneframes and banks of blinking lights. *"Ready when you are,"* a chartreuse pony with a cutie mark of a flask filled with bubbling green liquid said, glancing up at us through the monitor.

"These images are of the far past," Xenith intoned.

The second monitor looked down on a vast factory floor. The factory was filled with six huge, interconnected vats full of churning luminescent stews that rippled with lavender and green beneath glass coverings, the light casting colored shadows over everything. Arcane apparati hung down from the ceiling. Catwalks ringed the vats and another hung suspended from the ceiling above and between them, stopping midway across the room with some manner of control panel at the end.

"Again with the catwalks-over-factory-floors aesthetic of wartime Equestria," I groused.

"Is that…?" Velvet Remedy began to ask as a single pony appeared on the third monitor. An elderly lavender pony with grey streaking her purple mane. The room behind her was about the size of this one, filled with identical monitoring equipment. But where we saw only a metal wall, her picture window looked out onto the factory floor in monitor two.

"Twilight Sparkle," I nodded.

"uh, yer goddess-ness," Calamity said to the air, tapping on the last monitor. "Ah hope yer aware this one is broken?" The monitor had a large crack running through it and was displaying only rainbow splotches.

{{BROKEN? WHAT? OF COURSE I AM! THE GODDESS KNOWS ALL!}}

The little sub-voices continued to telepathically echo the last two words for several seconds after the Goddess had "spoken".

"Lovely," Velvet Remedy said snidely.

"Ready to begin pony testing," Twilight Sparkle said, sounding just a hint nervous. *"Send her in."*

"Sending in Test Subject One," the pony on monitor one announced.

"Don't call her that!" Twilight warned. She trotted over to look out the window, floating a coffee cup filled with what looked like tea to her lips, sipping primly. She set the cup aside and leaned her muzzle over a microphone. On monitor two, a lovely blue unicorn with a mane that had aged to a luxurious silver slowly made her way out onto the suspended catwalk.

She turned and looked up to the window. *"Twilight Sparkle, I just wanted to thank you again for giving me this opportunity. It means so much to me."*

"You're welcome, Trixie," Twilight Sparkle said kindly. The name rang a bell, but it took a moment to place it. Trixie: the mare from the cottage outside Fetlock. She went to Manehattan for a meeting with Twilight Sparkle and never returned.

The lavender pony hit a button with her hoof and an ornate golden cup rose out of the console at the end of the walkway. Purple and green liquid rose through tubes running from the vats to the apparatus above. Then a thin stream poured into the cup.

Trixie walked across the platform and sniffed at the cup. *"Is that roses?"*

Twilight chuckled softly. *"Yes. I added the scent. Hopefully, it will taste like roses too."*

"Really?" Trixie looked up towards Twilight Sparkle with astonishment.

Twilight's ears drooped. *"Unfortunately, probably not."* She hesitated. *"Trixie, you know you don't have to do this…"*

"Oh, I want to," the blue unicorn insisted. "I want to help. And… this will make me more powerful? Like Luna and Celestia?"

"Well, not that powerful. But more powerful, yes."

"Like you then?"

Twilight Sparkle looked uncomfortable. *"We're hoping for more than that."*

"And… it's safe, right?"

"Absolutely," Twilight Sparkle assured the blue unicorn on the catwalk below her. *"All the tests have come back looking spectacular. The only variable is, well, dosage. And for that we need to do testing with pony volunteers like you. With luck, we'll get it right the first time, and you'll be the first new alicorn since Luna was born."*

The unicorn at the end of the catwalk nodded. And mumbled something that sounded like "great and powerful smells like roses", then looked up with wide eyes. *"You sure I shouldn't start with a little more, then?"*

Twilight Sparkle stifled a chuckle. *"No, I-"*

On the monitors, everything happened at once.

From the broken one, I could hear a terrible roar and the rainbow sprays turned to a flaring light.

On the other three, the world shook.

On the first, chunks of ceiling came down, some killing ponies outright, one blocking the door. A maneframe toppled in a spray of sparks.

On monitor two, the entire factory floor shook. I could hear the loud twangs as several of the cables holding the suspended platform snapped out of the ceiling. Sections of catwalk fell. Two of the vats were ruptured as a third of the ceiling came down, spilling their glowing contents onto the factory floor. I could see automatic systems severing and sealing the connections with the other vats. Trixie cried out as half the cables holding up her section of the catwalk gave way, turning it into a freely-swinging platform.

On the third monitor, alarms were blaring: *"Radiation surge detected!" "Seismic activity detected!" "Toxic contamination warning!" "Safe rooms sealing!"*

"No!" shouted Twilight Sparkle as a huge armored plate slid down over the door to her room. She turned to the window as massive armored shutters swung down from above.

"TRIXIE!"

On monitor two, Trixie's platform tipped, swinging in a low arc. The unicorn slid down the inclined surface, trying to find purchase, as the lower end of the catwalk segment impacted the glass roof of one of the vats, shattering it. The blue unicorn plunged into the vat.

All the monitors flickered and went dead.

The four of us stood in the security room, shaken, our eyes peeling away from the monitors to look at each other.

Monitor three flickered back on.

> *"Dear anypony. This is the Mare of the Ministry of Magic, Twilight Sparkle,"* a weakened Twilight said. *"It's been two days now since the megaspell strike on Maripony. I can only assume by the lack of rescue that this was not an isolated strike."*
>
> *"I'm leaving this record in case somepony does come. I'm trapped in Safe Room Three on the Maripony Vats Level."*

The elderly lavender pony addressed the camera.

> *"The safeguards that should allow me to open it aren't working; and unfortunately for me, I designed these rooms to withstand a nearby megaspell strike, so the room is more than a match for my own magic."*

Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Xenith and I watched the monitor, realizing we were watching Twilight Sparkle's goodbye letter. My vision began to blur wetly. I tried to force myself not to cry. I'd cried too much this week already. But the tears rolled down my cheeks anyway.

> *"I'm out of food, and the safe room's water talisman seems to have been corrupted."* She gave a wry smile as she said, *"At least, I'm fairly confident that pure water isn't supposed to be that color. I'm also beginning to suffer hallucinations. I think that I'm hearing the screams of the ponies in Maripony, like something horrible is happening to them. But I know that's impossible. These walls are soundproof.*
>
> *"I keep hearing Trixie's voice in my head, screaming. Sometimes, it gets so bad…"*

The lavender pony waved it off.

> *"Not important. What's important is that we tried. We tried, and we came so very close. Another week, maybe even just a few more days, and the work we did here would have not only changed the war, I believe we could have forced a peaceful resolution.*
>
> *"What's important now is that we still have one more chance. Find Spike. He's my most loyal assistant… my number one assistant. …Find him…"*

Twilight Sparkle seemed to fall to sleep. The Monitor flickered out again.

"Spike?" Xenith asked.

The monitor burst back to life. Twilight Sparkle's haggard face was pressed close to the camera. She looked atrophied, crazy.

> *"Something's going on here. I… I don't know what. But it's bad. If you're in Maripony, get out. Get out while you can and drop a zebra missile on this place…"*

Suddenly, there was a loud, metallic grinding from the speaker below monitor two. On the monitor, we watched as the metal plate over the door lifted up, the metal shutters over the windows lifted.

Monitor two sprang to life. The vats room was a disaster. The floor was waist thick in mixed fluids. Something swam in the water. No, not swam… the body of a light red unicorn pony was being dragged through the liquid by a telekinetic tendril. We watched as the tendril hauled the body out of the pool and up the side of one of the vats. A moment later, the body disappeared over the lip and into the vat.

Streaks of blood rose up several of the vats.

On monitor three, Twilight Sparkle was crawling towards the door, too weak from hunger and dehydration to stand. Unable to stand, she couldn't see what was just outside her window.

Light flared in the room. A blue light that took the form of Trixie. The blue unicorn stood, shimmering, in front of Twilight Sparkle. From this angle, we could clearly make out her face as she spoke to the lavender unicorn who once bore the Element of Magic. The Trixie illusion spoke, but no words came out.

"I'm sorry, Trixie," Twilight Sparkle whimpered.

As the Trixie illusion's mouth continued to move, Xenith pushed past me and leaned close. Our zebra began to read the movement of the illusion's mouth.

"…to be sorry for. Your experiment worked, after all. It worked more wonderfully than we ever dreamed it would. Don't be sorry. Be happy. We're going to live forever, you in I."

I felt a deep, dark chill and prayed that Xenith had mistranslated that.

"What?" asked a startled Twilight.

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to be strong enough to save you, Twilight Sparkle."

Velvet Remedy gasped as light blue tendrils of telekinetic energy snaked into the room and wrapped around each of Twilight's hooves.

"No!" Twilight Sparkle struggled with more strength than should have been possible.

"It's time to save you now, Twilight Sparkle," Xenith continued to speak for illusion-Trixie. "We're going to be very close now, you and I."

"Oh Goddesses," Velvet moaned and buried her face in Calamity's mane as the tendrils slowly dragged Twilight Sparkle, kicking and screaming, towards one of the vats.

I was shaking. I wanted – so desperately wanted – to turn away. But I couldn't.

Twilight Sparkle let out a last cry as she was dragged over the lip of the farthest vat. One word, a name I think, but I couldn't make out what it was.

The two monitors went blank. And this time, they stayed that way.

* * *

Oh Goddesses! oh Goddesses! oh Goddesses!

I felt utterly numb with horror. Velvet Remedy was crying. Calamity looked grimmer than ever.

The whole room shook, the air filling with the squeal of grinding metal, as the shutters over our own window lifted up.

We stared out over the vats. This wasn't just a similar room. It was the *same* room.

Centuries had not been kind to the room beyond. Another third of the ceiling had collapsed, as had two of the vats. The pool on the floor had turned to sludge covered with a sickly layer of dust and floating debris.

Swirls of colored light seeped up from the two still-intact vats. They danced in the air, exploding like fireworks. In my head, I heard the echoes of half-remembered fanfare, but not from any memory of my own.

{{THE GREAT AND POWERFUL GODDESS WELCOMES YOU!}}

"Okay, how in tarnation do we kill *that?*"

"Calamity!" I hissed.

More swirls of light lifted from the vats. They shimmered, merging together, until the giant face of Trixie loomed above us. But not just Trixie, as little motes of other ponies' faces occasionally burst to the surface like zits, crawling along the head and mane of Trixie before sinking back.

{{FEAR NOT! FOR I, THE GODDESS, ALREADY KNOW WHY YOU HAVE COME! RED EYE, THAT TREACHEROUS PONY, DESIRES MY END. BUT THE GODDESS IS NOT WORRIED, FOR THE GODDESS IS GREAT AND POWERFUL AND RED EYE IS NOT!…}}

Somehow, through the sheer soul-breaking horror of what I was seeing and what I had just witnessed, the little pony in my head stomped for me to pay attention. She did not like where this was heading.

"Fear not," Xenith began, "For I, the goddess, already…"

"You can stop that now," Velvet Remedy hissed.

{{…YET.}}

I squeaked. Then fought to find my voice. "Red Eye has seen these recordings, hasn't he."

{{IT MATTERS NOT THAT HE HAS SEEN THEM.}}

That would be a yes.

{{IT MATTERS THAT HE HAS DISOBEYED ME AND PLOTTED AGAINST ME! IT MATTERS THAT HE HAS BEEN WITHHOLDING FROM ME! RED EYE HAS NOT SENT ME A UNICORN IN OVER A YEAR AND THE GODDESS BELIEVES HE WILL SOON STAND IN THE WAY OF MY UNITY ALTOGETHER!}}

"And… let me guess," I prodded. "You need us to kill Red Eye for you?" Please let it not be something as stupid as that. There wouldn't be enough facehoofs in the world.

The illusionary fireworks changed. A spinning pinwheel of crimson flame swirled behind the floating glower of the Goddess, over-signaling her displeasure.

"Ugh," Velvet Remedy whispered, cringing back. "Even for a real Goddess, this would be a bit much." She neighed. "Honestly, if we must have an eldritch-nightmare-of-arcane-science 'Goddess', does she have to be a freaky-carnival-sideshow goddess too?"

{{DO NOT BE ABSURD! THE GODDESS CAN SLAY HIM AT ANY TIME I CHOOSE! BUT…}}

And here it comes.

{{IT IS POSSIBLE THAT HE HAS DISCOVERED SOMETHING THAT MAY BE A THREAT TO THE NEW, GLORIOUS WORLD WE ARE BUILDING! AND BEFORE THE GODDESS DESTROYS HIM, WE… I… MUST KNOW WHAT THAT IS!}}

Well. Okay. That makes much more sense.

"Says the Goddess who claimed to 'know all' not twenty minutes ago," Velvet Remedy muttered.

Calamity nudged her with a wing. "Wouldja kindly not go upsetting the telepathic psycho-gestalt?"

"And why us?"

{{BECAUSE THE SECRET THAT RED EYE SEEKS, THE SECRET HIDDEN EVEN FROM THE GREAT AND POWERFUL GODDESS, IS LOCKED AWAY INSIDE A WAREHOUSE ON MINISTRY WALK IN CANTERLOT!…}}

Oh! So that's the place Red Eye is trying to get into. I remembered a conversation with Watcher:

Yes, one of Equestria's heroes did decide that her Ministry would be the Ministry of Awesome. They even built a Ministry Headquarters for it on Ministry Walk… After a few years, Luna ordered it crated up, and they began using the M.Aw HQ for storage.

{{…WITH CONTROLS WHICH CAN ONLY BE OPERATED BY A PEGASUS…}}

Clever. So, the Goddess didn't actually need me. She needed Calamity. I wondered how Red Eye was planning to get past that.

{{…AND BEYOND A SHIELD WHICH ONLY A MINISTRY MARE CAN STEP THROUGH!}}

And that would be the Bypass that Red Eye was trying to get through. But why did…?

Oh! Of course. *Close family or direct descendants thereof.* The Goddess needed Velvet Remedy as well. Once again, I was the one just clearing the way.

{{IN ADDITION, THERE IS ONE THING REMAINING THAT PREVENTS UNITY. A… FLAW IN THE PROCESS THAT MUST BE CORRECTED BEFORE IT CAN BE BROUGHT TO EVERY PONY IN THIS BLIGHTED LAND!}}

"Y'know, now that Ah've seen what this Unity is all about, Ah'm fine with that."

{{THAT IS BECAUSE YOU ARE ONLY A PONY! YOUR KIND CANNOT THRIVE IN THIS WORLD ANY LONGER! YOU MERELY SURVIVE! AND BARELY AT THAT! BUT MY CHILDREN CAN THRIVE! MY CHILDREN ARE MORE POWERFUL! MORE CAPABLE OF FACING THE MUTATED DANGERS

OF THIS WORLD! THE VERY POISONS WHICH KILL YOU MAKE MY CHILDREN STRONGER!}}

"Your children can't even breed," I pointed out. "Every single alicorn I have seen is a mare. You have no stallions. Now I'll agree that can be *fun;* but when it comes to 'thriving', that's a doozy of a problem!"

The main voice of the Goddess was silent a moment. Flares and fireworks continued to explode behind her glowing, faces-covered face. They whispered incoherently in my mind, giving me a headache.

{{LIKE THE GODDESS SAID, A FLAW! BUT ONE WHICH CAN BE CORRECTED WITH THE RIGHT MAGIC!}}

"Let me guess. You want Rarity's little black book." The Goddess did need me after all. She needed somepony who could pick a lock.

* * *

As our alicorn escorts marched us back to the *Sky Bandit,* all my friends were wondering the same thing I was: what now?

"Can you all read lips?" Xenith asked. Okay, so not all my friends were wondering the same thing.

Red Eye still had me over a barrel. But…

I stopped like I'd been hit in the face with a bale of hay. I lost all feeling in my hooves as one more horrid realization flooded through me.

"Li'lpip?" Calamity asked. Something in my expression was making him look very worried.

"She said… Red Eye hadn't sent her any unicorns in over a year." My mind flashed back to experiences with slavers. And the little hints that Red Eye, or at least Stern, was particularly interested in unicorns.

And another unicorn too. She'll fetch a pretty price, this one.

If it wasn't a unicorn, I'd say toss it back in the lake.

"But if Red Eye wasn't sending unicorns to the Goddess…" I said darkly, "Then he's keeping them for himself."

I turned and looked to the others in desperation. "Red Eye talked about controlling the weather, moving the sun and the moon. He couldn't do that if he just became an alicorn. But he's not aiming to become an alicorn. He's aiming to become one of… of…" I pointed a hoof back at Maripony. *"That!"*

The only way he could possibly hope to get that kind of power was to duplicate what happened to Trixie. And he could. He'd seen the videos. And based on his claim that the fortress in the Everfree Forest was designed as a new home for the Goddess, he was building a duplicate of the Maripony vats at the Cathedral.

He wasn't sending the Goddess any unicorns because unicorns have the strongest magic of all ponies and *he was keeping them to consume himself!*

Footnote: Level Up.
Maximum Level

Skills Note: Stealth has reached 100%

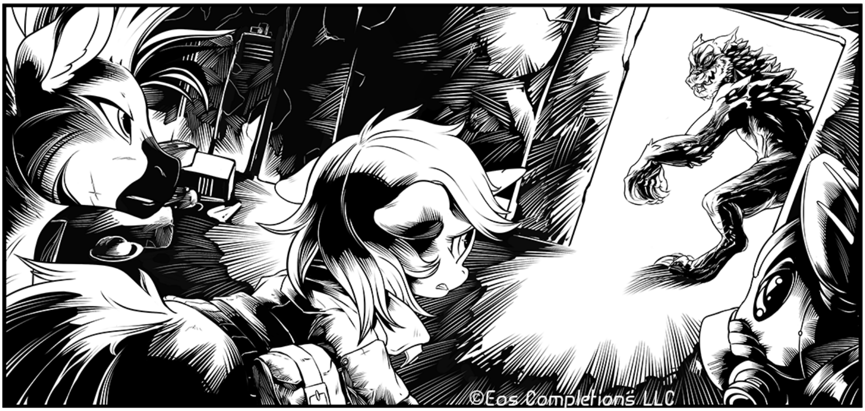
New Perk: Celestia Tier Telekinetics – The things you can do with your levitation magic are the feats of legend. You can effectively fly at the skill level of a novice pegasus. Who knows, maybe you could even move the sun?

Volume Four

The Shadow of the Ministries

Chapter Thirty

Hunters and Prey



"What are you on the lookout for?"
"Two very angry types of movements. Slow, lumbering, powerful movements and jerky, erratic, excitable movements. Both coming for the kill."

Virtues.

My first real advice, out of the Stable, was to find my virtue. Well, no, it was to find a weapon, armor and friends. And as daunting a task as that seemed, I believed I had succeeded admirably. It was the advice that followed – to find that defining positive characteristic that would get me through the darkest horrors that the Equestrian Wasteland could throw at me without losing myself – that still eluded me. Instead, I substituted other goals, other quests. I was driven to make this blasted world a better place, a brighter place, for the ponies trapped within it.

I felt all my efforts had just hit a wall.

Red Eye was just too smart, too devious and too well-organized. I underestimated him at every turn, and he used it against me with skill approaching panache. Even his seemingly insane claim to approaching godhood was backed by a crafty and altogether horrifying plan. The sheer cruelty, the coldly calculated butchering of unicorns in an act that would surpass murder, struck a blow to my very soul. And yet, I could already envision his argument: what is the suffering death of a few dozen or possibly even hundred unicorns today for generations of safety and peace for millions in the future?

I tasted bile.

The Goddess was… insane. And yet, she was effectively untouchable. Immensely powerful. And her army of minions, while considerably smaller in number than Red Eye's, were amongst the most formidable opponents in the entire wasteland. And they were completely devoted, if not directly controlled, by her whims. And her whims amounted to our extinction.

And she was such a potent telepath that even if I could come up with a plan, she would rip it from my mind before I could get close enough to her to implement it.

We were racing apotheosis. And we were losing.

I felt the darkness closing in oppressively. If ever I needed a virtue to hold to, it was now.

But even virtues could turn on you. They could go astray, become warped or perverted. Watcher had told me of the six greatest virtues of ponykind – kindness, laughter, generosity, honesty, loyalty and magic – although he made it clear that there were many others, and that my own was likely not on that sacred list. I had quipped that I could possibly collect broken, wrecked versions of each of these; I was doing far better at that, it seemed, than finding ponies of true virtue. Still, I had been joking.

Now I had met the Goddess, the thing that was Trixie, and I knew I had witnessed the epitome of the corrupted virtue of magic. All I needed to do was find corrupted kindness and I'd have a set.

{{OH, BUT YOU HAVE MET CORRUPTED KINDNESS, LITTLEPIP!}}

The cruel, sweet voice of the Goddess blasted through my head, swarmed with a chorus of whispers, mostly agreeing. The weight of her thoughts on my mind was heavy, almost suffocating.

{{IT'S YOU.}}

No! No that was not right. She couldn't be right.

I was better than that. I had to be better than that.

But even as I fiercely denied the Goddess' sadistic suggestion, my mind conjured up doubts and demons as if seeking to prove her right.

I had saved the slaves from Old Appleloosa only to abandon them to the care of a town that traded with slavers. I had slaughtered the raiders who raped and hunted that blue pony in Manehattan, only to walk away and leave her to her fate once the immediate threat had passed. How many more? How many other times had I inserted myself into a situation, tried to help, then left? Should I count all of Fillydelphia as a victim of my kindness? I remembered my image in the mirror, reflecting my soul. Was twisted kindness what I had seen there? Was it a monster?

No… no this was sick and poisoned thinking. It was the Goddess mercilessly tormenting me where I was weak. I had a virtue. A good and true one just waiting for me to discover it.

I had to.

* * *

We stepped out of Maripony's most intact structure and into the angry daylight, four of the Goddess' alicorns guiding us back to where the *Sky Bandit* had landed.

My PipBuck began click at me. The balefire bomb had been detonated underground here; the radiation bleeding off of the Splendid Valley sinkhole was nowhere close to the horror of the Fillydelphia Crater. At least, not above ground.

A nearby wall held what appeared to be a map of the building above a pair of water fountains. My PipBuck's click-clicking sped up ominously as I brought it close to them, but I was more interested in scanning in the map for future reference. I suspected I might need it.

All around us, alicorns watched silently from behind crumbled walls or stood amongst broken pillars and collapsed rubble. Their silent presence was eerie and sinister.

“Thriving?” Velvet Remedy asked in a hushed voice, dipping her head. “It feels more like they haunt this place.”

I nodded, lowering my voice to reply almost instinctually, as if the alicorn’s silence demanded we speak softly. “And have you noticed that they haven’t said anything?” Not one of them had telepathically spoken a word since we encountered them in Splendid Valley. In previous encounters, they had been boastfully chatty. “I think the proximity to the Goddess is overwhelming them; their individual minds are being drowned out by hers. This close, they become little more than drones.”

“Not that Ah cared much fer their ‘individual’ personalities,” Calamity chimed in, whispering, “Seein’ as they were all variations o’ *Goddess-is-great, rah-rah-us, y’all-are-insects.* Silence ain’t entirely un-golden.”

After a moment of thought, he continued, “Ah reckon it’s the Taint. Splendid Valley’s ripe with it.” He pointed out, “She seems t’ be able t’ communicate with ’er so-called children outside, but nothin’ like this, and not with normal folk ’cept in very special cases like Red Eye. But here, she’s in our heads like it weren’t nothin’. Ah’m bettin’ this whole valley is a massive amplifier t’ her.”

Wonderful. “Well, then don’t anypony think anything about what we do now until we’re out of this Goddesses-forsaken place.”

Calamity barked a laugh at my choice of phrasing.

The alicorns, of course, said nothing. They wove us through the rubble to the flat of asphalt which had once been a landing zone for sky chariots. The *Sky Bandit* sat waiting for us. On the roof, Pyrelight danced and hooted at our return.

Velvet Remedy stopped.

Calamity hesitated, his ears perking as he watched the bird. “Hold up there,” he whispered, putting a foreleg out to block me. The four alicorns kept walking towards the *Sky Bandit* either unaware or unconcerned that their charges had stopped following. “That sounds like a warnin’.”

Another alicorn dropped out of the sky behind us and raised her shield.

“It is,” Velvet Remedy breathed.

The four alicorns trotted up to the Sky Bandit, the lead one beginning to turn towards us expectantly, when the asphalt around them erupted in blasts of magical energy. All four alicorns were killed, three instantly with two of them melting into goo, the fourth collapsing several yards away, missing multiple limbs and bleeding to death with a pitiful whinny. Velvet Remedy’s horn flared as her anesthetic spell allowed the creature to spend her last seconds without pain.

The alicorns in the ruins around us stumbled in unison. Two more fell as shafts of colored light sliced through the air.

Velvet Remedy muttered something, closing her eyes as her horn flared and five small, flickering orbs of energy shot from the tip. One of the orbs drifted swiftly over my head and floated there. One stayed above Velvet. The others sought out Calamity, Xenith and Pyrelight and hovered over them like tiny guardians.

“New spell?”

Velvet Remedy nodded, saying “I’ll explain later” as she looked for a way to run. The alicorns in the ruins were bringing up their shields.

The air was filling with magical energy blasts.

A pack of hellhounds was charging across the tops of the rubble, moving with terrifying speed to engage the alicorns under the covering fire of more hellhounds in the valley.

They’d mined the landing pad! My mind conjured images of hellhounds digging up from beneath until less than half an inch of asphalt separated their holes from the world above, then wondergluing the mines to that thin barrier and filling in the holes behind them.

“Back inside!” I shouted. Regroup first. Get out of the line of fire.

I turned, only to find we were blocked by the shielded alicorn standing behind us. Beyond her, the doorway back into Maripony stood dark and empty. The concrete steps leading up to it tore apart explosively as a hellhound burst out of the ground behind us. Massive claws ripped though the alicorn’s shield and tore huge chunks of meat from her side as she turned to fight it. The alicorn almost got a spell off before the hellhound ripped his claws through her face, felling her.

{{INSOLENT CURS!}}

A high-pitched whistle blasted through the air and through my head, the Goddess projecting both mentally and magically through the ruins of Maripony’s air raid sirens. I pressed my hooves to my ears, but it didn’t help. I was unable to think, unable to move under the assault. Calamity, Velvet Remedy and Xenith all did the same, only the zebra seeming to get any respite from the effort.

The hellhound immediately fell, clutching his ears, howling in pain.

The others cringed in pain then turned, fleeing blindly back into the valley. The one in front of us did not fare as well; three alicorns descended upon him, dropping their shields as they skewered the ambushing creature, driving glowing horns through his thick hide.

One of the three was hit by a lancing beam of light blue energy and dissolved. A hellhound sniper who was either far enough away not to be debilitated by the Goddess’ sonic/telepathic attack, or who had protection from it. Clearly, not all these creatures were poor shots.

An orange beam of light hit Calamity, striking him in the wing. For a brief moment, his whole body glowed orange, becoming a Calamity-shaped lamp. The little orb over his head popped, and the glow receded back to his wing before evaporating, leaving a hole in his wing that I could put my hoof through. Velvet Remedy’s spell had saved him from being turned to ash. My pegasus friend collapsed in shock, his scream drowned out by the Goddess’ attack.

The siren stopped.

The attack continued, but now the flurry of poorly-aimed beams of magical energy were replaced with a small number of expertly aimed ones. The attacks flashed uselessly against the alicorn’s shields. In the wake of the sonic attack, the hellhounds didn’t charge the base again.

“Really shoulda worn muh old armor,” Calamity grunted as Velvet Remedy knelt over him, her horn glowing as she tried not to cry. “Hey, ’least Ah ain’t bleedin’ out, right?” The magical energy had warped the flesh of his wing around the wound and incinerated the feathers.

“Hush now,” she ordered. “Quiet now. Save your strength and let your medical pony do her work.” From her pained expression, I could tell it was bad.

Another bolt of energy struck the rubble we had taken refuge behind. The alicorns had flown out to strike down the snipers, but every time they got close, the hellhounds disappeared into the ground. All they were managing to do is get drawn further from the base and increasingly separated. The Goddess had begun recalling several, either suspecting or experiencing a trap.

“Did you see how all of the creatures reacted when the first four were killed?” Xenith asked as she hunted through her pouch of bottles and ingredients. “If the Trixie-monster experiences each alicorn’s death, perhaps the death of many at once is painful or disorienting to her.”

I nodded, filing that away for examination when we were safely outside the Goddess’s range. I looked to Velvet and asked, “Will he be okay? And will he be able to fly again?”

Velvet took longer to answer than I would have preferred. “I can repair the structural damage to his wing with my mending spell, but I can’t heal the wound. He’ll need at least one extra-strength restoration potion to begin to heal properly, more if he wants to fly again anytime this week. And right now, we do not even possess a healing potion.” She looked at me sadly, “If you’ll remember, I used up all of our medical supplies patching you lot up inside Stable Two.”

I felt a pang of guilt.

“Quite a spell ya got there,” Calamity praised, resolutely ignoring his doctor’s orders. “Ya saved muh life.”

Only the slightest smile touched Velvet Remedy’s frowning expression. “Yes, I had hoped to barter for more medical supplies from Doctor Helpinghoof. But with Tenpony Tower surrounded by Red Eye’s forces, he wasn’t willing to part with anything more than a few healing bandages. So I spent part of my time there learning a couple new spells. A disintegration ward seemed prudent.”

Xenith pulled out a vial and offered it to Velvet. She took it and wrapped it in a telekinetic sheath, keeping it floating nearby. She scowled as she added. “Unfortunately, this wing needs more than my spells and some bandages to heal.”

“I’m going to need to cut the warped flesh away before I can start rebuilding and mending the bones of your wing,” Velvet Remedy insisted remorsefully, addressing Calamity. “This is magical damage; if I don’t remove all the affected flesh, your wing will never heal properly. You’re going to bleed a lot when I do so, but Xenith has given me something that should reduce the blood loss.” She frowned, “This would be excruciating, so I’m going to have to use my anesthetic spell. You’re not going to be able to move for the better part of an hour.”

A beam of pink light struck above the doorway into Maripony. A cinderblock’s worth of the wall glowed and dissolved.

Xenith turned to me. "You made the wagon fly before. Can you fly us all away from here?"

I shook my head. I'd been asking myself the same thing. "I can, but floating myself is incredibly draining. I don't think I'd be able to get us very far. And even if I could, I can't move us very fast. And all those hellhound snipers would need is one good shot to blow us up."

"Then we are trapped here until we find medical supplies for the winged one."

"Dang, girl, have ya just not learned our names yet? Ah'm Calamity."

"My apologies… Calamity. I am… not used to thinking in names or to being…" The ex-slave zebra was clearly having difficulty putting her feelings into words. "…on a level of familiarity where names are appropriate for me to utter."

I could have sworn I'd heard her refer to at least one of us by name before, but now that I thought about it, I couldn't place an instance. The closest I could come was her questioning how Calamity got his name. Only the largest figures in her life had been given names, Red Eye and Stern who ruled those who had enslaved her, or figures of legend like Doombunny and Nightmare Moon.

She'd kept her silence for how many years? I knew how impossible it had seemed to form friendships with my peers in Stable Two, having been the awkward blank-flank with the alcoholic mother. Being a zebra in the Fillydelphia slave pits would have been even worse. I wondered if she ever bothered to learn the names of most of her tormentors. Is this the way she had come to identify ponies in her mind?

"Do you believe there may be medical supplies inside here?" Xenith asked, looking towards Maripony.

I checked my PipBuck's automapping feature as well as the scan of the wall map. To my chagrin, Maripony's medical clinic was in the section that had collapsed into the crater. Anything that had been in there would be crushed, scattered and probably tainted. There were bathrooms that might have medical boxes, but would they be stocked with the sort of supplies Calamity needed? I felt it was doubtful, and I wasn't eager to try. The horror of what lurked in there, and what she had done, curdled my blood. I knew the Goddess needed us, but what if she changed her mind? I didn't want us to suffer the same fate as Twilight Sparkle.

"There's a hospital a few miles from here," Calamity announced, surprising all of us. "Part of the gem minin' town that served this place. When they shut down the mines, the town was abandoned; but they opened parts o' it back up to house the ponies who worked at Maripony an' their families."

I didn't ask how he knew any of this. Calamity had been surviving in the Equestrian Wasteland for many years before we had met. Who knew what rumors and scraps of information he had learned? I was content just to be thankful for this change in our luck.

Another shot struck the wall I was hiding behind, causing it to glow and melt. I scooted my tail to another bit of cover. We weren't going anywhere until they stopped taking so many potshots in our direction.

"And there should be plenty o' rooftops t' hide out on while Ah heal," Calamity assured us. "Ain't perfect, but probably the safest place from the hellhounds… if we c'n get there." We all knew we were talking about several miles' travel over hellhound-infested, irradiated and taint-soaked landscape.

"Just point the way, Calamity," I said, sounding more sure than I felt. "I have a plan."

"Ya always do," Calamity grinned. "Jus' get us t' Old Olneigh, an' we'll be fine."

* * *

The hellhounds seemed to lose interest after about an hour. It made me wonder if there was a larger purpose behind the attack or if this had just been sport.

I stood on the railing ringing Maripony's short water tower, my binoculars floating in front of my face. From here, I could just make out the shapes of Old Olneigh in the distance, resting peacefully. An elevated highway passed nearby, going nowhere. The highway had collapsed less than half a mile beyond the off-ramp to the town, leaving a line of rubble and crushed wagons that time and the valley had mostly succeeded in erasing.

Turning my gaze towards the horizon, I glimpsed a shadow that may have been Ponyville. Beyond that, the sky turned hazy and thick from the smoke of the Everfree fires. Walking around the rim, I realized I could spot three of those needle-like towers rising into the cloudy heavens above. I was fairly sure that one of them was the same one I had spotted from the outskirts of Cloudsdayle, but I hadn't seen the others before.

Coming full circle, I looked back again at Old Olneigh, then traced the path we would have to travel to get there: a set of train tracks that stretched from Old Olneigh to Maripony, crossing rocky flatland with only minor undulations save for a gulch filled with hints of scraggly vegetation and sick, stagnant water. I couldn't make out any details, but the plants beneath the bridge moved as if there was a much stronger wind blowing down the gulch than the faint breeze that stirred my mane.

My view turned black as an alicorn flew across my narrow scope of vision, obscuring the landscape. I put away the binoculars, hurrying back down.

More alicorns were beginning to return. The ones already here had returned to their silent lurking, seeming to pay us no attention. I was expecting either the Goddess or her alicorns to attempt another escort, but it was almost as if they had forgotten we were here. Yet that was impossible; they kept looking right at us. Maybe the Goddess was gauging what we would do next? Or maybe she was recovering? She had lost quite a few of her children over the space of an hour.

I wasn't the only one who found this behavior bizarre.

"Howdy!" Calamity said, trotting shakily up to one of the dark purple alicorns and waving a hoof in her face. "Remember us? The ponies y'all want t' find yer stuff for ya? Got a hurt wing here. If one o' y'all would care t' hitch yerself up, we c'n all be outta yer mane that much faster."

He turned to me, wobbling a little from the last fading effects of the anesthetic spell. "This is weird, right?"

"Maybe the Goddess is taking a great and powerful nap?" Xenith suggested. Calamity snorted a laugh that ended in a wince.

"Hey, Xenith," Calamity suddenly announced, "Ah never said it, but Ah wanted y'all t' know Ah'm glad yer free an' all."

Merciful Celestia, Calamity. Awkward much?

Xenith looked at him quietly. Then said simply, "Thank you."

Calamity chewed on that, then tried again, "So… those potions ya brew? Any o' them good for strengthenin' armor or helpin' w' equipment maintenance?"

"No," Xenith answered. Seeming to understand his intention, she offered politely, "I do know many poisonous brews should you be looking to make your bullets more lethal."

I felt for him. He was trying to connect with the new member of our group. He had been the most welcoming of her, trusting my judgment. But since then, they hadn't really bonded the quiet way Xenith and Velvet Remedy had, or even established the sort of relationship (would rivalry be the best word? grudging respect?) that Xenith and SteelHooves shared. They were friendly acquaintances; and I suspected Calamity was trying to find a way to turn that into true friendship.

Calamity trotted around the alicorn. She turned lethargically, keeping him in her sight. "Ah'm tempted to start shootin' 'em. Take out as many as we can." Velvet shot him a look of alarm and he backed down with a grin. "Ah didn't say I was gonna. Ah just said it was temptin'."

Xenith shook her head. "We should make the most of this respite to implement the little one's plan without interference."

I floated Calamity's Enclave armor out of the Sky Bandit, as well as Spitfire's Thunder and our other vital equipment. I didn't want anyone trotting up to it when the area around the passenger wagon could still be mined.

As I placed our equipment in the center of a large hunk of capsized wall, Velvet called us to gather close. Pyrelight landed on her back, puffing herself up and looking important.

As a precaution, Velvet was going to cast another ward against disintegration upon us. I had been watching Calamity when his orb burst, but I hadn't realized the ones over the rest of us had disappeared simultaneously.

"I can cast this spell over multiple friends," Velvet explained as she recast her spell, "But it collapses after any of you are hit. So please be dears and try not to get shot."

She turned towards me. "Especially you. I really hate this idea. You're too vulnerable. Why is it that you are always the one in the most danger, Littlepip?"

But she knew the answer. We'd been over this before.

All my friends gathered on the slab of concrete as I wrapped them and it in a field of levitation.

Velvet turned to help Calamity into the Enclave Armor, being extremely careful with his partially-mended wing. She was wearing the zebra-armor again, insisting we minimize the risks as much as possible. "Particularly since Littlepip seems insistent on taking more than her fair share."

I floated the chunk of Maripony's wall upward, not stopping until it was at least four stories above me. I was counting on the concrete to shield them from the hellhound's magical energy weapons.

I understood Velvet Remedy's concern, but this time it couldn't be helped. My telekinetic magic had grown powerful enough that I could float this large section of wall and all of them on it easily, but adding myself to the mix would create such a strain that I would be lucky to make it halfway without suffering burnout. I agreed to lighten myself enough to prevent my hoofsteps from triggering mines or announcing my presence to any hellhounds who might be lurking just beneath the surface, but that was all. In the end Velvet Remedy had to accept it.

It had to be me.

I started forward, moving around the ruins of Maripony. The slab of wall with my friends on it floated along high above me.

While I would not say as much, I was grateful to be able to take the risk in their place.

Was this something Corrupted Kindness would do? As soon as I had that thought, I pushed it out of my mind. I couldn't afford self-doubts right now.

As I reached the cracked edge of the Maripony base, I hesitated. My PipBuck was click-clicking, warning me of the radiation. But there was no sound, no special display on my E.F.S., designed to warn me of taint.

Old Olneigh suddenly felt a very long way away.

* * *

Splotches of red on my E.F.S. compass alerted me to more threats.

I floated the zebra rifle close and slipped into S.A.T.S. even as I trotted. I was pacing myself, advice from a book (*The Egghead's Guide to Running*) that I perused in Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum during one of the hours where Homage was playing DJ Pon3 and giving me a chance to catch my breath. I had several miles to go, and I wanted to make the distance as quickly as possible – which surprisingly meant *not* pushing myself as fast as I could.

A spiny dart hit my side, bouncing harmlessly off my armored utility barding. My targeting spell latched onto the first bloatsprite, then the second. I fired off a three-round burst at each, and the taint-swollen bugs erupted in flame as they fell to the ground.

I continued to trot along the tracks, quickening my pace just a little to make up for seconds lost while shooting. The wall holding my friends floating high above me, keeping pace. We were nearing the gulch.

My skin was beginning to itch in strange places. I fretted, wondering if it was nerves or an allergic reaction. Or, worse, the first symptoms of Taint.

My E.F.S. compass filled with red. Dozens of little lights appeared. Then more. The gulch was swarming with hostile life.

I trotted onto the tracks and prepared to break into a gallop, hoping that the rather rickety wooden bridge would offer me protection.

Something bobbed up over the edge of the gulch. I shuddered, staring at the taint-mutated thing. It looked like a plant, its huge head covered in gas sacs that allowed it to float, the stalk drooping down and dragging behind it. A sphincter in the center of its head tightened and then spit foul goop at me. The spore-laden effluent splattered the ground near my hooves, sending up a choking stink.

The Equestrian Wasteland never seemed to run out of new vileness. Several nearly identical floating spitter-plants were moving up out of the gorge towards me.

I slipped into S.A.T.S. again, locking targets on the closest two, sending two three-round bursts into the sphincter-heads of each monster as a third sprayed its filth at me. I felt the crud splash against my armor and coat, burning where it touched and causing me to drop my targeting spell as I gagged on the stench.

The two floaters I had hit ignited spectacularly, the gas pods that gave them mobility rupturing in flame like miniature versions of Pinkie Pie Balloons.

Three more of the floating spitter-plants rushed up from the gulch, one hitting the burning form of the first one and igniting explosively itself. The second spit its spore-sewage at me while the third charged towards me as if intending to latch on and devour. I cantered to the side, dodging the spit and bucked S.A.T.S. back up, targeting the charging one first and then the one which had successfully hit me.

Bullets burst from the silenced muzzle of the zebra rifle. The two targeted plants became flailing columns of fire. But the floaters kept coming. I dropped the targeting spell and brought it back up immediately, targeting two more.

One of the burning plants spit at me, its spore-sewage now on fire. Mercifully, the burning crud splashed across the tracks behind me, missing by a yard.

My skin was beginning to really hurt where I had been hit. I dropped out of S.A.T.S. again and shook, flinging the goop away from me. Then lifted the rifle and brought up the targeting spell, firing again at the advancing, half-burning herd of plants.

One of the burning floater plants tumbled back into the gulch. I could hear more gas-bladders catching fire and bursting as a rapid chain-reaction quickly set several hundred yards of the gulch ablaze.

I sprinted, galloping across the wooden bridge as flames from the gulch began to lick at it. Fierce heat and a choking reek buffeted me as I forced myself across, my eyes stinging. Several of the plants in the conflagration below spit burning spore-sewage at me. Most hit the bridge, setting it properly ablaze. Burning effluent struck my left flank, my hindleg and saddle bags catching fire!

I bit down, knowing that a scream could bring hellhounds. I pushed, running as hard as I could, my leg in searing pain. I was pouring concentration into levitating the wall now, the physical agony threatening to break my spell. The fire was spreading up my side. It hurt to breathe.

Flames licked at my hooves, burning them. I did scream.

I was almost across the burning bridge, the gulch below a writhing river of fire, when the hellhound tore out of the ground, alerted by my scream. But he was far enough ahead of me that Calamity could target him from the platform above. Four blasts of magical energy knifed down from above, melting the hellhound into colored sludge.

I began to lower the wall, choking on the smoke and the stench of my own burning coat, knowing I wouldn't be able to hold it much longer. It was three yards above the ground when the pain overwhelmed me and I dropped it.

I made it to the end of the bridge in a stumbling gallop and collapsed, rolling on the ground, squirming as I put out the fire on my left side, screaming.

* * *

"Just get to Old Olneigh and everything will be fine," Xenith chimed, her exotic voice taking a mocking tone as she peered at the town below through my binoculars.

We had made it to the top of the overpass and were looking down at Old Olneigh from above. From here, we could see dozens of hellhounds lurking about the town. A couple were even on rooftops.

"Galdangit, why do ya ponies ever listen t' me?" Calamity asked. "Ah ain't Li'lpip. Y'all know all my plans ain't worth shit."

I flopped over, telekinetically floating the binoculars to my eyes. I still couldn't feel anything – Velvet Remedy's anesthetic spell doing its work – but that didn't prevent me from using my levitation spell. In fact, it almost made it easier. I had spent the second half making myself light enough for Pyrelight to carry while I floated the others and the wall behind us.

The older unicorn had wasted no time in wrapping me with the rest of our medical bandages as she scolded me on taking on yet another gruesome attack for the team. But with the pain gone, and out of the choking smoke, I felt assured that I had done the right thing. There was something wrong with me, I could feel it where the spit had hit me. Something crawling beneath my skin that even Velvet's spell couldn't cover. I had floated my own forehoof so I could check my PipBuck's medical diagnostic spell. It confirmed that I was suffering from *something,* but it couldn't determine what that something was. It wasn't poison, and I checked clean for spore infestation. No, the spore-sewage of those floating plants had been laced with Taint.

I had never believed I could make the distance without exposure to Taint; I had never been that lucky. Rather, it would be a matter of *how much* exposure, and how quickly Taint took its toll. I knew that the society keeping Tenpony Tower's secrets possessed a spell that could purge Taint itself, although I didn't know if it could reverse the damage caused by it. That would be my hope.

The ruins of Old Olneigh included several nearly-intact buildings, one of which was the hospital. Sitting on the roof was a contraption I had never seen before, colored like a pink-and-yellow candy cane with periwinkle propeller blades affixed to the top.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing it out.

"Ah believe… that's an earth-pony sky wagon," Calamity said. "Trust it t' an earth pony t' find a way t' fly."

I could use that! No more running on the ground as I levitated the others in safety. "Do you think it still works?" I asked hopefully.

"Nope," Calamity said, deflating my daydream of floating everyone behind me while keeping safely off the ground in the earth pony contraption. But then he added, "But Ah'll bet Ah c'n fix 'er up so she will."

Hope resurrected. "Perfect! Because that's our Plan B."

I looked over the rest of the town, noting a strange glowing antenna array amongst multiple crates and barricades on a roof across the street from the hospital, and a scattering of old military vehicles on the road. There was a capsized wagon with metal boxes scattered around it, and a heavy tank half-sunken into the ground. Instead of a normal earth tone or camouflage coloration, the tank had been painted in bright, multicolored stripes. The paint job was old and faded, but still added a surprising splash of color to the town.

I laughed. "That tank looks like a rainbow." I could think of no logical reason for it to be colored that way.

"Really? Is that what they look like?" Xenith asked. At my questioning expression, she explained, "I have never seen a rainbow."

I first found the zebra's assertion impossible, then tragically sad, then curious. I looked up at the clouds that sealed off the sky. I'd seen it rain here. I'd seen it rain a lot, in fact. But I had never seen a rainbow Outside, except in posters and illustrations. In fact, the only real rainbows I had ever seen were in Stable Two, when the Apple Orchard sprayers were on. The Overmare's artificial sunlight would stream through the mist, creating shimmering arcs of beautiful color. I used to beg my mother to let me play in them when I was younger. She even let me once.

"Ayep," Calamity said in answer to my thoughts. "T' get a real rainbow, ya need either magic or direct sunlight. Ain't been a proper rainbow in the Equestrian Wastelands probably ever."

He thought a moment, then added, "'Cept maybe in the Everfree Forest, since the cloud cover gets mighty fragmented there."

I exchanged looks with Velvet Remedy as a knife slipped into my heart. I had never thought to miss them until I realized we were living in a world without rainbows.

* * *

"Ah'm gonna shoot 'em," Calamity announced before picking up Spitfire's Thunder in his teeth and aiming it over the concrete railing of the overpass, taking aim for one of the hellhounds in the town below.

"No!" hissed Xenith, pushing Spitfire's Thunder with her hoof. "If you shoot them, then you will let them know we are here."

"Wait," Velvet Remedy started to suggest, but my focus was on Calamity and Xenith, and their focus was on each other.

Calamity started to say something through the gunbit, then put the weapon down to properly argue. "Ayep. Ah figure Ah c'n pick a couple off before they realize where the shots are comin' from, then more as they come outta those buildin's t' investigate. Let 'em come runnin' towards us. We got plenty o' space 'tween here an' there t' snipe them off in."

I was already pulling out my own sniper rifle, levitating my anesthetized body into an optimal sniping position.

"Littlepip, wait!" Velvet said, but her next words were cut off by our zebra companion.

"Are you fools?" Xenith trotted in place. "This is not how you behave in enemy territory. Our enemy outnumbers us. And these are not stupid raiders, but clever opponents. You do not engage them wantonly."

Calamity cocked his head. "An' what would ya have us do? Hide an' sneak?"

"Yes," Xenith nodded firmly. "Be alert, move fast, keep downwind and to the shadows. Avoid them whenever possible. Kill only those we cannot avoid, and do so swiftly and silently."

Calamity looked to me, "Ah say we take out what we c'n while we c'n do so from a distance. Less o' them means less t' worry 'bout fightin' up close."

Xenith sighed, stepping between Calamity and me, facing him. "Listen to me. I have watched you. You are a hunter. You know how to hunt. But do you know how to be prey?"

Calamity took a step back, lifting the bug-eyed visor of his Enclave armor to stare back at her directly. "Ah ain't got no interest in bein' prey."

"Well, I have spent most of my life as prey. And I know how to survive when you are outnumbered and chased," Xenith informed him. "Perhaps you should listen."

Calamity again looked past her to me. "Li'lpip? Yer call." Xenith turned towards me too.

I weighed the options. But ultimately, the tactics I knew won out. "I agree with Calamity. We pick off what we can now before heading in."

I floated up the sniper rifle, loading armor-piercing rounds and taking aim. From this distance, I couldn't use my targeting spell to help me. But I had no trouble lining up a headshot just through the scope.

Xenith nickered, shaking her head. Calamity picked Spitfire's Thunder off the asphalt of the overpass and took position twenty yards away from me.

"Damn it, wait!" I heard Velvet Remedy shout, but I had already pulled the trigger.

BLAM!!

BLAM!!!

The air filled with the sound of ear-splitting thunder as we began to fire down on Old Olneigh. I watched as the head of the hellhound in my sights burst in a bloody spray. I moved to acquire my next target. The hellhounds were all looking up now, turning, beginning to move. I found a second and fired, but the creature moved too fast. I aimed ahead of him, firing a second shot and then a third. I was no longer able to aim for a specific part of the body; I was just hoping to hit him at all. My second shot did, but it only slowed him down. The third missed entirely.

I kept trying.

Several shot back, beams of magical energy cutting the air, but we were too far away and too well protected by the overpass to be in danger from anything other than a dedicated sniper.

Calamity was having far better luck. Every shot hit its target, crippling or killing. He started picking off the ones in the street as I turned my focus to those just coming out of doorways. That worked better. I felled a second. And a third.

"Aw crap," Calamity hissed as the hellhound he had turned his aim on dove into the ground, digging through the street like it was wet toilet paper. Calamity fired, blowing the creature's tail off as it disappeared.

They weren't coming out of the doors anymore. And as I looked up, I saw the last of the hellhounds on the street disappear into a hole.

We had killed ten of them.

"Well brilliant," Velvet Remedy facehoofed. "Both of you. Now they know we're here *and* we've attacked them first." She looked cross.

Calamity wiggled his wounded wing. "Muh wing disagrees." Velvet Remedy's ears drooped.

"Now," Xenith told Calamity, "You are prey. We are all prey."

* * *

They came for us on the overpass while I was still paralyzed by the anesthetic spell. The hellhounds weren't foolish enough to come running up the on ramp like we had hoped. Instead, they dug their powerful claws into the pier beneath us and began to climb.

The first one clawed its way over the railing almost on top of us. Pyrelight was the fastest to react, filling it with a face-full of radioactive green flame. Calamity recovered quickly, firing two of the novasurge rifles in his Enclave armor directly into the hellhound's torso as it lashed out with its claws, barely missing the balefire phoenix. The monster tilted back, dissolving.

"They're coming up from beneath us," Xenith warned before turning to dig in her satchel.

Velvet Remedy cooed to Pyrelight, "Would you be so kind as to burn them off the pier?" Pyrelight hooted happily and leapt over the edge. I could hear the roar of flames beneath.

Pyrelight was able to take out two of them before more on the ground abandoned climbing and started shooting at her. She appeared, dodging and weaving between shots as the magical energy attacks drove her away from the overpass and the ponies she was protecting.

Xenith produced a bottle and passed it to Velvet Remedy. "Dip your slugs in this before you load them," she instructed. "The poison will cripple the creatures if your shot isn't enough to kill them."

Velvet Remedy opened her combat shotgun, floating out the slugs and dipping them as instructed, a grim look on her face.

Two more crawled over the railing. I was ready this time, floating up Little Macintosh as I slipped into S.A.T.S. and fired into their heads. The hellhound's brains splashed out of the exit wounds.

Three more replaced the two I had just killed. And the sound of rending concrete warned me that more were digging directly up through the overpass from the top of the pier.

Velvet Remedy's anesthetic spell hit one of the hellhounds, causing the creature to fall. She lifted her shotgun towards another. And hesitated.

The hellhound lashed out at her, his claws slashing shallow lines of red across her breast and throat as I telekinetically shoved her back.

"Surrender," she offered to the creature. "Don't make me hurt you."

"Galdangit!" Calamity shouted, firing a bevy of magical energy bolts into the hellhound. The creature collapsed into a steaming puddle, leaving Velvet Remedy and Calamity staring at each other through the rising smoke. "Don't reason wi' 'em! They ain't interested!"

"They're people!" She shouted back. "They have a right to live."

"Y'all heard the zebra!" Calamity shouted, turning to fire at another hellhound as he dug up through the overpass asphalt. "They're huntin' us."

"And whose fault is that?" she quipped back loudly, throwing a protective shield around Xenith. The hellhound's claws tore through Velvet's shield like it was made of colored air. The zebra stepped inside the attack, rising on her hindlegs and throwing up one hoof to stop the monster's swinging arm while driving another hoof against the thick hide of his throat. The hellhound collapsed, choking.

"Has anypony even *tried* just talking to them?" Velvet cried out in exasperation.

I reloaded Little Macintosh as quickly as I could. They were coming faster now. It was getting harder to put them down as quickly as they surfaced. And one good swipe from their claws would kill any one of us.

There were bloody hellhound corpses and piles of sludge all around us. We'd managed to kill nearly ten more, miraculously without getting crippled or killed. Even if Velvet Remedy had a point, it was far too late now. I told her so as I fired point blank at a hellhound and somehow missed. The creature bore down on me with its claws.

Velvet Remedy sang. A single, high-pitched note. The hellhound immediately fell back, its clawed paws covering its ears. It turned and fled back down the hole it had come out of so fast that I didn't have time to bring up my targeting spell and shoot it in the back.

Velvet continued to hold the note, clear and strong. I looked around, and the other hellhounds were disappearing, fleeing the overpass.

Once they were all gone, Velvet's voice finally broke. Panting she fixed all of us with a glower. "Savage animals and monsters are one thing; but with people, there's usually a way that doesn't require killing each other!"

* * *

We moved cautiously into Old Olneigh. The sun was beginning to set, and I wanted to get into the hospital and out again before the coming darkness put us at an even greater disadvantage.

We were taking Xenith's advice now. Not engaging. Moving swiftly and quietly. Of the group of us, only Velvet Remedy was unskilled at stealth, so I was floating her along with us. The faint glow coming from my horn and shining around her worried me. It was like I was painting her as a target. But from our experiences, it seemed the hellhounds hunted by sound more than sight (possibly by scent as well) so it felt more important to keep her hooves off the ground.

As we pushed through the remains of a building, I spotted several pony-shaped figures laying on a floor above us through a collapsed section of ceiling. I waved a hoof at the others. "Hold up. I want to take a look."

I floated myself upwards, sweating with the effort, my horn glowing brighter. But there were no red marks on my E.F.S. compass, no sign of life on the floor above at all, so I felt momentarily safe in pushing myself.

As I levitated through the hole, I could see the bodies were of Steel Rangers, three of them clad in metal armor and a fourth who was not. The fourth sparked my curiosity: a yellow unicorn mare wearing thickly armored red robes with the sparks-and-gears symbol of the Steel Rangers embroidered into it. I had not seen a Ranger wearing anything other than Steel Ranger armor, save for Elder Blueberry Sabre. All four of them had died from terrible wounds inflicted by hellhound claws. The bodies were desiccated; they had been here quite some time.

The hellhounds had mined the floor around the bodies. One by one, I disarmed them.

I began scavenging the bodies, searching for any clues as to what brought these four to Old Olneigh as well as any supplies or ammo that might benefit us. I was in luck. The robed pony had two StealthBucks and a memory orb. One of the other rangers had magically-enchanted ammunition that was of the same caliber as Calamity's normal battle saddle.

I brought my treasures back to the others.

"Ya ain't plannin' on lookin' inta that there orb while we're in Old Olneigh, right?" Calamity said with a gentle warning. "Y'all remember our little talk, don'tcha?"

I nodded solemnly. "I Pinkie Pie Swear."

"Ya what now?"

"Nevermind. Tell you later. And yes, I promise."

As we moved to the edge of the street, my E.F.S. warned me that there were at least four hellhounds around the corner. I halted everyone.

We might be able to take them. We had surprise. But it would only take one good swipe for them to behead one of us. And the fight would draw others. No. We would continue to follow Xenith's advice. I motioned everyone back the other way.

"Ah hate this," Calamity muttered in a whisper. "Ah want t' hunt the hunters, not play these scurryin' games. Ah ain't a rabbit."

Xenith gave a wry smile. "Humility does not come easy to you, does it?"

Calamity turned to her. "What's that s'posed t' mean? Are ya sayin' Ah'm a show-off?"

"She wouldn't be entirely wrong, would she?" Velvet Remedy purred with just the right tone to sooth and embarrass the pegasus.

* * *

The partially collapsed firehouse tilted at an insane angle, making the entire world seem alien and threatening. Calamity, Velvet Remedy and I scrambled across the maze of broken floors and leaning columns. Pyrelight swooped between floors, occasionally diving down to the bright red firehouse wagons that lay crushed and partially buried under swaths of flooring.

A hellhound lurched into the doorway behind us… only to find Xenith waiting for it. A swift blow beneath the ribs froze the creature in place, paralyzing it. As it fell, a bolt of magical energy shot through the doorway, striking the zebra in the throat. She glowed brightly and the orbs over our heads burst. Xenith fell, bleeding from a wound in her throat the size of a memory orb.

Velvet Remedy struck the monster with an anesthetic spell, then rushed to Xenith, floating out her dress and using it to apply pressure to the wound. The dress was quickly ruined as it soaked with blood.

"C'n Ah please kill 'em?" Calamity huffed. Velvet frowned, not saying anything. Xenith rasped, "Yes… silently… and cut them open… the blood… smell…"

The hellhounds were hunting us, tracking us now clearly by scent. I understood what Xenith intended, as did Calamity. Velvet Remedy turned away, unwilling or unable to watch as we slew the two hellhounds. We made it quick, merciful. It was the least we could do, considering that we were about to defile their bodies.

"This ends *any* chance of diplomacy," Velvet moaned.

I hesitated, floating a jagged piece of sheet metal out of the debris and positioning it over the hellhound's body. I had to disembowel him. Spread his stink. Cover our path with the stench of his death. It was vile.

Slowly, I lowered the jagged metal, slashing at the hellhound's armored hide. Slowly sawing into him. It was incredibly hard, and the reek was unbearable. I took what little comfort I could in knowing that at least he had died quickly and without pain.

Corrupted Kindness, the little pony in my head whispered in the voices of the Goddess.

Please no.

By the time I was done, I felt sick to my stomach. I'd killed plenty, but this made me feel like a raider. My mind conjured up the image of myself, bleeding, wearing raider armor – the image from the magical mirror.

* * *

There were bathrooms on the floor above, and medical boxes in each of them. Cracked mirrors and shattered toilets leaned at crazy angles. The whole tilt of the building was making me nauseous. Even more than I already was from the grisly work before.

My PipBuck complained as I got close enough to the sink for it to scan the contents of what little plumbing remained functional. The levels of radiation in the water here rivaled and usually exceeded the levels in Fillydelphia.

I sat, braced against the wall and picked the lock on the medical box in the little mare's room. The lock clicked open with ease. I opened it, emptying the box of its meager medical supplies and adding them to the supplies from the medical box in the little buck's room. Nothing that would help Calamity's wing, but the small healing poultice would close and heal Xenith's wound. The wasteland sometimes gave small favors.

I pushed myself up, feeling unsteady on the canted floor, and hurried back to the others. They were gathered in what had been the firehouse kitchen.

Velvet Remedy took the poultice and applied it, then borrowed a needle and thread from Calamity's clothing repair kit. A cabinet two buildings back had offered up an old bottle of apple whiskey, half empty. I whimpered inside as the drink went to sterilizing the needle. I could use a sip. I contented myself with a draught from my last canteen. It was nearly empty.

I itched in ways I shouldn't itch.

The poultice had stopped the bleeding and partially closed the gaping wound in Xenith's neck. Velvet began to sew the wound closed completely. Even with Velvet's expert attentions, the wound was going to remain an ugly scar for the rest of her life. I realized not for the first time that the zebra would be dead if the magical bolt had stuck her just an inch differently.

"Now you wait here and rest," Velvet ordered the zebra mare. "And Littlepip, you watch her. I'm taking Calamity to find something to use as rags to clean you butchers off." Velvet stuck her nose in the air and trotted out.

Calamity scowled but followed, pausing next to me long enough to remind me, "No orbs."

I watched him walk out after her. Rags? Sounded more like an excuse to talk to Calamity alone.

I let out a long sigh. "Worst. Day. Ever." It wasn't. But ever since we entered Splendid Valley, the day had been working very hard at becoming so, reaching a Luna-Tier rating of badness.

Xenith lay still for almost a full minute before getting up and moving about the kitchen. She had to brace herself on sloping counters as she rifled through the cabinets.

"Well, at least you're as good at following doctor's orders as the rest of us," I chuckled as the zebra started pulling pots out and setting them on the table. One of them slid down the incline; I caught it magically before it hit the floor.

"Xenith," I asked as a worry from the days before flooded back, "Do you trust me?"

Without turning from her task, she replied by asking, "Trust you about what?"

It was a dodge, but still a fair question. "Do you trust me as a… person?"

"No," she said simply. "Should I?"

I was taken back by the cool, honest answer. "Why not?"

"You are impulsive and have difficulty controlling your urges," she said as she opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a hunk of something covered in grotesquely mutated mold. She set it on the table and I caught it as it tried to slide away, recoiling from the sight of it.

"You are a very quick thinker and equally swift to act," Xenith continued, crouching to check lower drawers. "This makes you adaptable, perhaps more than any pony or zebra I have ever known. It allows you to improvise where others would be paralyzed. But it also leads you to rash actions from hasty decisions and gets you into trouble as often as it gets you out of it."

She finally pulled a knife from one of the drawers. She set it on the counter. I caught it too as she turned to look at me. "Although those are just my observations, and I have not known you very long." She looked me over. "Why do you ask?"

I wasn't sure what to feel. I wanted to argue with her, but a large part of me suspected she was right and cursed her for being so observant. "Do you think I'm evil?"

Xenith stopped, looking at me oddly. Then laughed. "No, little one. You are one of the most caring souls I have ever met, pony or otherwise."

Again, the little pony in my head whispered *Corrupted Kindness* in the voices of the Goddess.

"Do you think I'm cursed then?" At her odd expression, I clarified, "I have been touched by Homage."

The zebra turned back to scouring the kitchen, pulling pans out of a lower drawer to get at a spark battery-powered hot plate. "Of that I am *quite* aware."

I felt myself flush nervously. "Wh-what do you mean by that?"

"There are lovers who are quiet and there are ones who are not," Xenith stated. "You are not one of the quiet ones."

Oh no, dear sweet Celestia.

"You are what my tribe called a 'whinnier'."

I felt myself blushing hotly. I wanted to throw myself in the Splendid Valley sinkhole out of sheer embarrassment. "You mean… all those… each…" I squeaked.

"Yes," Xenith confirmed. "Each."

It took me several minutes and an old sack that the zebra had given me before I stopped hyperventilating.

"Can you breathe now?" Xenith asked gently.

I nodded. "I think so."

"The medical pony is right," Xenith said with a soft smile. "You are cute when you are that color."

I felt faint, my breathing threatening to quicken again.

I took a moment and composed myself as best I could. "So… am I cursed? Because I love Homage?"

She paused. Then turned away. I waited for her to answer. The answer I received was not what I had expected.

"The zebras may have been wrong about Nightmare Moon," she admitted. "You ponies may have been right. The wielders of the Elements of Harmony may have broken whatever hold the stars had over Nightmare Moon. Luna may have been… different."

She turned to me, "But that does not mean that the touch of the stars was still not upon her. That it did not influence her in more subtle ways." She looked to me. "I am open to your beliefs, but I ask that you be open to mine. Perhaps there is truth in both."

I frowned. I didn't want there to be any truth in her beliefs. But I had seen things that suggested otherwise. Things that suggested maybe there was something dark and terrible up there in the vast emptiness that stretched behind the moon.

"But Homage is not evil, she is not twisted, she is no Nightmare Moon," I insisted. "In fact, she saved our lives. She saved yours."

Xenith nodded with a sad smile. "And would you not say it was quite an amazing shot?"

"Absolutely. It was an… what?"

"The weapon from the stars wants to kill," Xenith said. "It yearns to kill."

Okay, now that was just creepy.

"I will accept that Homage is a good, kind pony. And that she is not cursed. Because you ask me to," Xenith conceded. "Even though I do not trust your judgment, I believe you speak truthfully in this. And I suspect you are better experienced at matters of the heart than I am"

I smiled, feeling a touch of relief. "Thank you, Xenith…"

The zebra shook her head. "But I ask in return that you keep an open mind to the things I believe, and a watchful eye for warning signs. The stars take the greatest delight in giving us the means to destroy ourselves and each other. Do you truly think that your relationship has not changed now that she has taken a life for you?"

I felt a chill. I had not considered that before. Or, if I had, I had seen the consequences as being entirely beneficial. She had saved my life. How would that not bring us closer? But had I not, that very night, wept in front of her for having killed a Steel Ranger?

Regardless of whether Xenith's superstitious fears were justified, she had led me to re-examine what had happened in a less self-centered way.

I looked up into the zebra's eyes. "Thank you."

* * *

I floated the whole array of pots and pans. Xenith had quickly discovered that no surface in the room was flat enough to safely cook on after a mishap with the hot plate.

Not far outside, Calamity and Velvet Remedy had started arguing. We could hear it from inside the kitchen, but could not make out the words. Not that I wanted to. Xenith fretted, worried that their discussion would attract more hellhounds, but so far they were keeping their voices low enough. Still, it added an unpleasantness to the air.

I distracted myself by returning to an earlier part of my conversation with Xenith. "Do you trust me to tell you the truth?"

"Yes, little one. Unless you believe it is in my best interest to lie."

Crap. I hated to think she might be right about that. I would have preferred to be more like Homage. But if it came to telling the truth or protecting my friends, I had a track record of choosing the latter. And while I regretted the necessity, it was rare for me to reconsider the choice. Did this mean that I was playing SteelHooves to Homage's Applejack?

"Well, would you trust me with your life?" I asked as Xenith took the knife and started scraping chunks of mold into one of the pots. She finished then put the knife down. I caught it again.

"It is not a matter of trust. You saved my life. You are responsible for it." Ugh. More insane zebra logic. All the worse since it was insane, understandable zebra logic. "I have not chosen to release you from that."

Frustrated, I asked, "Why not? Look where following me has got you? You nearly died! I've taken you from one hellhole straight into another."

The zebra looked at me, a touch of sadness in her eyes. Then turned away. She filled a pot with horribly irradiated water, then began to mix the mold into it, not answering me. I sat and watched. In the very least, maybe I would learn something.

One by one, she added more ingredients, none of which looked healthy. I hoped this wasn't anything we were intended to consume.

"Don't talk," she said, although I wasn't talking at all anymore. "Be quiet. Run. Hide." Her voice was low, heavy. "Get your food and hide, or a pony will take it from you. Don't talk. When they come for you, relax. Let them do what they will do. Don't fight. Don't scream. Don't talk."

She looked up at the canted ceiling. "When they hurt you, grunt. Whimper. Don't talk. Always the same. Until they get bored. Then hide. Heal. Prepare for the next time."

She looked to me. "If they move to kill you, kill them. Then hide the body. Hide it well. Find another place to be. Don't let them suspect you. Be meek. Don't talk. Hide."

A cold shiver passed through me as I stared at the scarred zebra mare.

"It was only after a truly exceptional horror that I dared join the fights. I did not wish them to see that I could fight, but I could no longer bear it." She lowered her head, looking to me with tears in her eyes. "Before you, the slavers. Before the slavers, my husband. Before him, my parents. I have never owned myself. I am not comfortable with the idea. I know this role. I can survive it."

I shook my mane. "I may be responsible for you, as you say. But I am not a slaver. I do not *own* you."

"And for that, you are better than all the others," Xenith admitted. "But still the fact remains that I do not know how to live being responsible for myself."

"I think," I told her, "You'd do fine."

* * *

The hallway tilted at such a nauseating angle that I was walking as much on the wall as the floor. I followed close to Calamity, keeping an eye on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle for hellhounds. We were hunters again at Xenith's request.

"Another one on our six," I whispered to him as the light appeared on my compass. "Supply room, I think."

"Ah see it," Calamity nodded, reminding me that the bug-eye styled visor in his armor had an E.F.S. of its own. Crouching low, the pegasus moved stealthily forward until he was in position directly in front of the door, his four magical energy rifles pulsing eagerly. I telekinetically pushed open the door, holding it so gravity wouldn't swing it back shut.

A skewering dart shot out of the supply room, bouncing harmlessly off the forehead of Calamity's black carapace armor. "Humph," he chuckled, raising on his haunches and striking at the bloatsprite with the stinger of his armor's segmented scorpion-tail. The impaled creature squealed as it died.

"Heh," he said, still chuckling. "Ever wish these things could detect threat level instead o' just threats? Ah almost wasted a lot o' ammo on a bug."

I smirked. "Often." I turned back to our other friends, motioning them forward. Velvet nodded and nudged Xenith, who was crouched and facing the other way, guarding our flank.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle tracked a friendly spot of light as Pyrelight swooped in and out of rooms, searching for enemies to burn… or rodents to eat. The balefire phoenix return to drop the charred corpse of a small animal at Velvet Remedy's hooves.

"Oooh. Thank you," Velvet sang lusciously, stroking the bird's plumage with a gentle hoof. Pyrelight hooted happily and stretched her wings fluttering off again. It boggled my mind.

"Y'know, yer just encouragin' her t' keep doin' that."

"And why wouldn't I?" Velvet said sweetly. "My little Pyrelight is a wonderful hunter. Just like she should be."

Calamity gave a grumpy look in Xenith's direction. At least, I assumed it was a grumpy look. With my friend hidden inside that armor, I really couldn't tell. But his posture struck me as grumpy.

I decided I preferred my friend out of that armor. It made him look mysterious and rather evil, and it put up a barrier between us that I didn't care for. I'd gotten used to it with SteelHooves, but not being able to see Calamity's face just felt wrong.

"She is a bird of prey, after all," Velvet reminded us. Xenith eyed the charred corpse and shook her head, then cantered towards us, moving with surprising ease down the off-kilter hallway.

Calamity flexed his injured wing, and I thought I heard him mutter, "So was Ah not s'long ago."

"So Calamity," I piped up, pulling his attention away. "I had a question that needs a pegasus' expertise."

"Shoot, Li'lpip," he said, seeming to cheer up.

"If I wanted to clear away a large area of clouds, say the area over Manehattan…" Say, just as a totally random example, the area above a megaspell chamber which requires sunlight to function. "How could I do so without having the Enclave all over me?"

Calamity nickered, "Oh no. Whatcha plannin' now, Li'lpip?"

"Just theoretical."

"Ayep. Sure it is," he said, clearly not buying a word of it.

Xenith moved up to the body of the bloatsprite. “Perfect,” she intoned, opening her satchel. Leaning down, she tore off its wings and spat them into the satchel. “Now I must find a room to complete the brew”

Xenith moved ahead, taking the lead again.

“Do Ah even want t’ know?” Calamity said.

“From what I’ve seen go into it, I prefer not to.”

Returning to my question, Calamity informed me, “Well, there’s only one way t’ clear an area that big that fast. An’ that’s with a sonic rainboom.”

The gears in my head started turning.

“O’ course, the Enclave’s response would be swift an’ deadly, but ya might have clear skies fer over an hour.” He chuckled ruefully. “Which, sad t’ say, requires a pegasus capable o’ performin’ one. O’ which the Equestrian Wasteland has exactly zero.”

The gears ground to a stop. Damn.

“Sorry, Li’lpip. Show-off or not, that’s one trick Ah ain’t never been able t’ do. Very, very few pegasi can, an’ the Enclave keeps ’em *real* close.”

* * *

When the firehouse had started to topple, the building came to rest against the Maripony Mining Administration Building. A canted firehouse window hung open about five feet from the opening of a shattered window on the opposite building.

“Just a hop, a skip and a jump,” I told Calamity with a smile. I remembered wearing Enclave armor from riding Rainbow Dash’s memory – it might look fearsomely heavy, but it was amazingly light. There was no reason Calamity couldn’t do this easily.

Calamity braced against the sloping floor. “Easy ’t say fer y’all who ain’t never had t’ do somethin’ like this without yer wings.” He looked at me. “If Ah fall, y’all are ready t’ catch me, right?”

“Just float him across,” Xenith suggested from the opposite window where she and Velvet Remedy were waiting.

“Yeah,” Calamity agreed. “Ah like that plan better.”

I rolled my eyes then whispered to him, “But which do you think will impress Velvet more?”

Calamity straightened up, shook his fears off, galloped and leapt. He made it with five feet to spare. Show-off.

My turn. I looked down the sloping floor and across the gap to the opposite window sill. It wasn’t even with this window, maybe two feet higher. I swallowed. In Calamity’s defense, the tilted floor was throwing me too.

I galloped forward, lightening myself at the last moment, after I had all the momentum I needed. I sailed across, smacking into Calamity’s armored tail.

“See,” he joked. “Ah told ya. Nothin’ t’ it.”

I snickered and shook my head.

The room was an open office space filled with desks and terminals, none of which had survived well. I checked my E.F.S. and found red lights moving around us, probably on the floors below. I motioned the others to be quiet, and once again I levitated Velvet Remedy as we moved.

As we passed the last of the desks, I noticed an orange and yellow book laying in an open waste bin. I floated it out, looking the book over. *The Big Book of Boom!* announced the cover, adding beneath: *The Dynamite Guide to Handling Explosives.* Below that was a picture of the author Red "Three-Hooves" Runner with a cartoon balloon saying "Ya better handle 'er right the first time, cuz she won't explode twice!" The book was crammed full of notes and papers. I tucked it away to look over later.

Underneath it was an audio recording. I downloaded it into my PipBuck and slipped my earbloom into an ear. (Surely Calamity wouldn't mind this; listening to the recording wouldn't remove me from my surroundings.)

> *"Mining Officer Torchwood to all concerned personnel:*
>
> *"First order of business: We will be having a surprise inspection in two days. Everypony needs to be well rested and at the top of their game. Maripony operations Overmare Sunny Days has authorized a half day tomorrow so that everypony can get plenty of rest and have their uniforms cleaned and starched. Anypony who uses this time to go to Ponyville and get drunk will not be allowed back into the Maripony facility or any operations building within Old Olneigh, and will be docked one week's pay. Baskets, make sure you have proper headgear this time or you will find yourself no longer employed by Maripony Mining Co.*
>
> *"Second order of business: Maripony Mining Co. has increased demand for productivity. This means you can expect an increase in work hours of twenty percent with a corresponding fifteen percent increase in your paychecks. Officers whose teams exceed the new quotas will receive a bonus. I cannot say what the bonus is, but I can let you know that the bonus will include ice cream. Likewise, we will be opening up several previously restricted tunnels to mining operations. The Maripony Mining Co. assures you that these tunnels meet and exceed our minimum safety standards.*
>
> *"Third order of business: There have been increased reports of trespass by relocated Diamond Dogs. Now I don't know if this is a territorial pack-mind thing or if they're just stupid, but if you find a Diamond Dog on Maripony property, you are to instruct the Dog to leave. If the Diamond Dog refuses, use of sonic deterrents are permitted. Ask your team Officers for the newest line in D4 (Diamond Dog Deterrent Device) whistles, now with convenient neck-wrapping loops.*
>
> *"Fourth order of business: Thanks to Brickbane, we have had to reset our Days Without Serious Injury board back to zero. Thankfully, Brickbane will recover the use of most of her limbs. Remember, D4 neck wrapping loops should be kept short so that your whistle cannot dangle into mining machinery.*
>
> *"Keep up the good work, everypony."*

I turned off the earbloom. We had reached the stairwell and my E.F.S. had lit up with more hostiles. Two hellhounds lurked visibly at the bottom of the stairs down. They were wearing makeshift armor and one of them carried a magical-energy minigun. There were more around the corner.

One of them started sniffing.

I motioned the others back and looked to Xenith. In theory, the potion she had brewed was altering our scent, making us smell like mold and bloatsprites. Still, going down to street-level was out unless Xenith thought now was the time to go on the offensive.

The zebra shook her head. She slipped forward and started up the stairs towards the roof. If I remembered correctly this would put us across the street from the hospital. I didn't think even Calamity could clear Old Olneigh's Mane Street with just a hop, skip and jump.

* * *

"What am I looking at?" It was not the first time those words had come out of my mouth.

A late evening wind moaned through Old Olneigh, pulling at our manes and tails. A yard from my hooves was the lumpy puddle of sludge which had once been the hellhound sniper positioned on the rooftop of the Maripony Mining and Administration Building. Calamity had fired on him the moment we burst out onto the roof, liquefying the creature before it could attack or howl.

A strange antenna sat in the center of the sagging rooftop, humming softly, surrounded by magical gemstones that radiated a soft blue light. Around the antenna were several tables, one of which was still intact and held a glowing terminal that faced away from us. The others had been clawed to shreds. Strange silvery boxes sat nearby, all but one of them similarly shredded. Hellhound claw marks sliced into the barricades that ringed the roof.

There were several dead ponies up here. All of them pegasi. All wearing the same black carapace armor.

"Enclave scouting party?" I asked Calamity.

Our pegasus walked amongst the corpses. They were old, just dried and rotting flesh hanging on bone. "No," he said, looking up. "This was a science team."

Calamity trotted round to the other side of the terminal. "Ah 'ave no idea what they would be doin' in Old Olneigh. Or down here at all, fer that matter." His voice was grim. "But Ah aim t' find out."

I recalled what Homage had told me about the night she found the weapon from the stars. Jokeblue had suspected it was part of a Grand Pegasus Enclave experiment. Perhaps she had not been so wrong after all?

"Maybe I should try hacking in?" I blurted out, wanting to see what secrets the terminal held.

Calamity's armored head looked up, and he lifted the armor's visor. He chuckled. "Be muh guest," he said, stepping away and welcoming me to the terminal with a swing of his scorpion-like tail. "But Ah don't think ya will be able t' hack this one."

"Come on, Calamity," I laughed good-naturedly. "I haven't met a terminal yet that I can't hack." I puffed myself up, taking that as a challenge.

"Y'all ain't never met an Enclave terminal," Calamity said knowingly.

I stuck out my tongue as I trotted over. "Technology's all the same. This is me, remember? The little mare with the PipBuck on her flank? Let me at it."

I stopped as I caught sight of the terminal interface. It was made of a strange white substance that I couldn't identify. I reached out to touch it and my hoof went right through it like there was nothing there.

It was made of… clouds? What the fuck?

Calamity laughed. I looked around. The Enclave supply boxes all had locks that were made of the same material, either white or a light shade of pink. I looked to him, demanding an explanation as the pony in my head ranted that this was not how things should be.

"Well, what did y'all expect pegasi built stuff out of? There are whole cities up there built almost entirely out o' clouds." I could feel him grinning behind that damn helmet. "What, didja believe only unicorn ponies had any magic o' their own?"

I stopped, frustrated. The very idea of terminals and locks that I couldn't get into because they were made of *clouds* was just… just… *wrong and unfair!*

The words of the Goddess floated back to me: *with controls which can only be operated by a pegasus.*

Fuck. The Ministry of Awesome had built key control systems out of fucking clouds. Anypony other than a pegasus who attempted to operate the controls would find themselves clutching slightly damp air.

A thought occurred to me. "Is there anyone other than a pegasus who can operate a system with a cloud interface?"

"Nope," Calamity said proudly. Then swiftly took it back. "Ayep. Griffins can."

So that's how Red Eye was planning to get past that obstacle. And I knew how he was trying to get past the second. We were on a clock again.

I sighed, tossing up my hooves in exasperation, and trotted back to the others, letting Calamity work on hacking the terminal. Instead, I moved to the edge of the building. I floated out my binoculars and looked across the street at the hospital. It looked shaken; there were massive cracks running up the walls and one corner had collapsed. A sign, a yellow cross with a pink butterfly in the center, had started to pull free from the wall two stories up; the upper bolts had torn from the wall and the whole sign hung precariously over the street below. Most of the windows were shattered and the winds of Old Olneigh whipped at stained hospital curtains.

Even still, it was one of the most intact buildings in Old Olneigh, and it was our best hope for the medical supplies we needed to fix Calamity's wing.

I looked across to the rooftop. I could see the earth pony flying contraption clearly, with its candy-colored paint job lit up in the setting sun, the name *Griffinchaser II* emblazoned on the side. It looked in sore disrepair, but I trusted Calamity's expertise.

I looked down into the main road of Old Olneigh, a Mane Street with a set of train tracks running down the center. Hellhounds scampered about, moving from one building to another in packs. Hunting us.

And night was falling.

* * *

I was staring at the spikes that adorned the top of a wrought-iron gate. They were ugly things, painful looking. I nodded my horn towards one of them, and the metal glowed with beautiful blue magic, reshaping itself instantly into a happily prancing mare.

I sent up a prayer of thanks to Celestia and Luna. I was in a unicorn mare. It felt good and right.

Even better, I was in sunlight. Perhaps the brightest, cleanest sunlight yet. The air was dusty but clean, reminding me yet again of how odd the air in the real world was.

I turned my eyes to the next one and wove the magical spell over it. This one became a prancing unicorn stallion. I was struck by how much it resembled Prince Blueblood. Almost a perfect likeness. The next spike glowed and transformed into a unicorn mare, head bent as if she was mid-charge, her horn aimed dangerously close to Prince Blueblood's…

"Behave yourself, Rarity," I heard myself whisper in Rarity's lovely voice. The blue glow of magic surrounded the two figures again and they were transformed into entirely different, happy and generic pegasi.

I felt a strange thrill as I realized who I was. Followed by a flash of guilt.

"That old spell, huh?" came a voice from directly behind me.

I turned, the blue pegasus with the shockingly rainbow-colored mane moving into view. "It's not polite to sneak up on ponies, Rainbow Dash."

"I wasn't sneaking," the pegasus said defensively. "I was just flying. It's not my fault flying is quiet." Rainbow Dash was wearing the purple and black uniform I had seen her in before. "So, what have they got you all the way out in this dustbin for?"

Rarity looked around, and I was treated to the sight of Old Olneigh, intact and well maintained and bustling with ponies. I was able to see the shops and homes that I had only known as ruins.

And yet, as glorious as this look into the past was, I was clearly not seeing Old Olneigh in its heyday. Most of the shops were boarded up. There was a sense of disuse hanging over much of the town. And the bulk of the ponies were clearly either military or associated with the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.

"Apparently," Rarity said ruefully, "They're having trouble with the Diamond Dogs again. Fluttershy has tried to talk to them, but it didn't work. So somepony thought they might pay more attention if I were to talk to them."

"Gee," Rainbow Dash snickered, "I wonder why."

"Why indeed."

"Did Fluttershy try to tell them that this wasn't their home anymore?" Rainbow Dash asked, hovering in the air in front of me. "Or, you know, that it's *dangerous?"*

"Of course she did," Rarity said. "Fluttershy even tried to compromise…"

"Oh brother," Rainbow dash facehoofed.

"But that was when they discovered that Twilight's magical…" my host searched for the best word. "…byproducts, shall we say, have started eating through the barrels. Sunny lost a pony trying to move them when several tore open like they were made of nothing but the covering paint." I watched us look Rainbow Dash up and down. "You know, I still can't believe you are wearing *that.*"

"Hey, we're Luna's elite aerial force. What else were we going to call ourselves?"

"How about anything other than the *Shadowbolts?"* Rarity suggested primly.

"Way I see it, why not play into the zebra's crazy Nightmare Moon phobia. The original Shadowbolts were all just Nightmare Moon, right?" Rainbow Dash grinned conspiratorially. "Why not use that to our advantage. Every zebra who sees us coming and flees the battlefield is one less zebra we'll have to kill. Or who might kill one of us."

"Still, I can never get used to seeing you look like that."

"Actually," Rainbow Dash put a hoof behind her head, brushing her mane. "I had an idea about that. Do you think your old dressmaking skills are up to working with armor?" the pegasus ribbed.

"Rainbow Dash! You *wound* me!"

"Oh!" came a shout from somewhere on my host's left. A moment later a dusty pony in a military uniform galloped to a stop and offered a salute to Rainbow Dash. Rarity stepped back.

"At ease, uh…" Dash looked at the pony's uniform. "…tank commander…?"

"Torchwood, Ma'am. Big fan. Followed your career since the Wonderbolts."

Rainbow Dash's face brightened. "Oh really? Did you see me at the GALLoPS last year?…"

My host shook her head. "I see you're going to be busy for a while, Dash. I'll catch up with you later," she said graciously, even though it was the pegasus who had sought her out. "Do you think you'll be free by dinner?"

Rainbow Dash turned back. "Oh, yeah, no problem. I want to throw some ideas past you."

I could feel Rarity smiling.

"Also," Rainbow Dash added, swooping close and whispering, "I heard rumor that you're working on a new spell with the Ministry of Peace? Something about keeping a pony alive and awake indefinitely?"

"Suspended animation, yes, although that's a *very* poor description of it" Rarity replied, nodding. "And I'm working on it for them, not with them. Part of a… private line of research that has finally born some fruit. But it still needs some fine tuning."

Dash grinned. "Great. Cuz that sounds like just what I've been looking for."

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Dare I ask?"

"Oh, just part of the Single Pegasus Project."

I could feel Rarity frown. "You mean that thing that has you putting those dreadful eyesores all over our lovely Equestria?" she snorted.

"They'll look better once they're done. I promise. Apple Bloom says they'll be 'elegant'. You like elegant, right?"

"Indeed I do. But I'll wait until I've seen them."

Rainbow Dash muzzle broke into a big grin. "Just wait until you see the main hub. Actually, you can glimpse its construction if you stand up on the roof of the hospital. Just face towards the water tower and look about a hundred miles up and out." Rainbow Dash paused. "You, uh, might need binoculars."

"Or a telescope," Rarity retorted.

"Heh. Yeah. Anyway, it's not named yet. They wouldn't let me name it what I wanted to, even though it's my damned project and my Ministry. So…"

"You wanted to name it Rainbow Dash's Megacool Center of Awesomeness, didn't you?" Rarity asked, ribbing back.

"Noooo!" Rainbow Dash hovered indignantly. Then admitted, "Not exactly."

Rarity laughed a charming and happy laugh. "Go tend to your fan, Dash. I'll meet with you later."

Rainbow Dash grinned, waved and swooped back to Tank Commander Torchwood. In seconds, they were deep into gushing over the aerial acrobatics of Rainbow Dash. A pegasus who could apparently do sonic rainbooms in her sleep.

Rarity turned and trotted away, humming a joyful tune.

* * *

* * *

"What did you do?" Xenith was demanding of Calamity as I came out of the memory. The pegasus cantered nervously.

"Ah don't know. It just started doin' that." My ears perked, picking up a high whine coming from the antenna array. I looked to Calamity who was staring at the terminal as if it had betrayed him.

With a sinking feeling, I asked, "Did you trigger a lockdown?"

Calamity shook his head. "Naw. Ah got in jus' fine. Weren't that hard." He looked up at me, his eyes wide inside the bug-like nightmare helmet.

"And? What is this place? Was it what you thought?"

Calamity swallowed. "It's an Enclave experiment all right. Under orders of Harbinger, one of the Enclave High Council. They were playin' wi' magic-laced sonics, hopin' t' control the hellhounds."

"They were trying to make these creatures into slaves," Xenith said in a low voice.

I looked around, drinking in the sight on the rooftop with new eyes. "I'm guessing it didn't work."

"What do you think the chances are that we're really lucky and Calamity just triggered the Leave Us Alone signal?" Velvet Remedy quipped grimly, trotting to the roof's edge and looking down into the street. She immediately backed up, eyes wide and frightened, her face going pale under her charcoal coat.

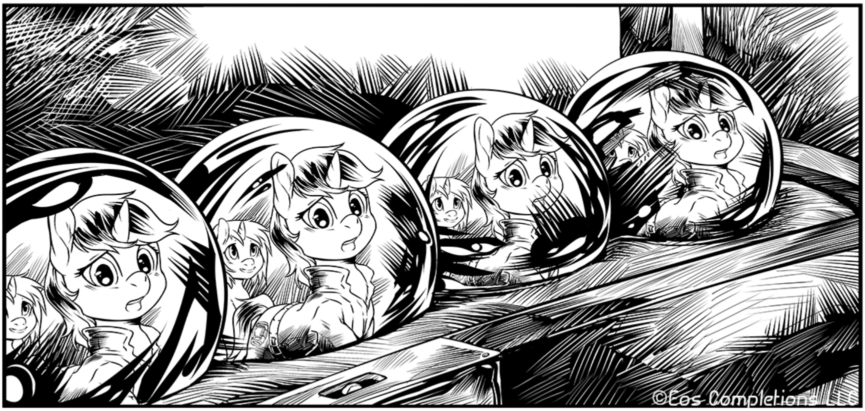
I dared a peek. *Celestia's solar-heated libido!* The street was full of hellhounds. Scores of them. More were moving out of doorways or climbing over buildings. All moving towards us.

And they looked pissed.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Thirty-One

Life Interrupted



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"We all go through periods of darkness. In such times, we can turn to the Goddesses, but it's good to have friends."

Memory.

All the thoughts we have, all the decisions we make, are rooted in layers upon layers of experiences. To understand ourselves, we must look to our own past. To our memories.

I believe that our pasts and our hearts make us who we are. Our memories define us. But what if we should lose them? Would we become untethered? Adrift? Would we even be the same ponies anymore?

If you could block out your most horrible and hurtful memories, would you do so to spare yourself the pain? And if you did, would you lose an important part of yourself in the process?

And what of higher thought? Reasoning and rationality? If I were to forget the discoveries that led to a realization, would I be able to grasp that revelation anymore? Could I piece together the logic of an argument if I could not remember having the argument?

How important are memories to our ability to even think? Or, at least, think clearly?

And what about the reverse? What if you added memories which were not your own? How often could you live parts of other ponies' lives, making their decisions, seeing the events that brought them joy or sorrow, before the boundaries that separated you from them began to blur?

Were memory orbs nothing more evocative than particularly well-written books? I knew from experience that a memory orb only preserved sensations. When inside a memory orb, I saw and heard and felt, tasted and smelled, but I was not privy to the actual thoughts and emotions of the hosts whom I rode. Did the visions into others' lives, no matter how vivid, have any impact beyond knowledge or entertainment?

And what effect might there be on a pony who relived the same memory orb over and over?

And what if you could take it a step further? What if you could hear a pony's thoughts? Read their minds. Perhaps sense their memories?

What if you were the Goddess?

What manner of pony would you have to be just to keep any sense of yourself?

⁂

I stared in horror at the mob of hellhounds pouring into the streets. They came from the alleys and the shattered ruins. They climbed out of windows and emerged from darkened doorways in nearly every building I could see. Every one, that was, except for the one place we intended to go: the hospital.

The first had already reached the Maripony Mining and Administration Building. Some were dashing inside. Others sunk their claws into the brick façade and began to scale the walls.

Calamity turned to the Enclave crates, shoving the claw-torn containers away until he reached the single undamaged one. I could hear him whisper what sounded like a prayer, although I knew no higher being that Calamity would pray to. Then he furiously clopped at the lock's cloud keypad.

The crate opened with a hiss and a wash of cool air. Inside was… a bundle of fluffy white clouds.

I would have facehoofed if the noise Calamity made at the sight hadn't been one of triumph. The pegasus lowered his head and kicked off his helmet, his orange mane bursting free. His wide eyes and self-pleased smile gave me a boost of joy. He'd stayed hidden behind that black, insectoid mask too long, and I had missed him.

"How did you know the combination?" Xenith asked curiously.

"Oh-one-oh-four. Harbinger's birthday." Calamity grinned proudly. Then sheepishly admitted, "'Twas on the terminal."

"A cloud?"

"Ayep! Y'all are in this mess cuz o' me. Ah plan t' get y'all out o' it." He leaned his head into the Enclave crate, grabbing the cloud bundle in his teeth. (He bit the *clouds* and *picked them up!* The little pony in my head was having an aneurysm.)

"Obferf!" he boasted through the clouds in his mouth. He trotted to the roof's edge, facing the hospital. A hellhound clawed her way up onto the roof in front of him, raising a paw full of long, flesh-and-armor tearing claws. Calamity backed away, dropping the cloud bundle (which simply floated where he'd let it go).

BLAM! Velvet Remedy's shotgun went off, the slug hitting the hellhound in the center of her left breast. The flesh rippled, but did not give. The hellhound howled in pain, toppling backwards from the impact.

"Thank Celestia!" whimpered Velvet Remedy, letting out a sigh of relief. I winced as I realized she was thanking the Goddess that hellhound's had thick enough hides to stop a shotgun slug at close range. Until now, I had only used Little Macintosh and the sniper rifle against them. I'd been lucky in those choices. Nothing else I had would likely penetrate.

Another hellhound clawed his way onto the rooftop directly behind Xenith. The zebra danced, giving a well-placed buck to the creature's chest. I heard ribs break, and the hellhound fell, rasping, fighting for breath from what I knew was a punctured lung. A second buck sent the hellhound over the edge, catching another climber in the face and knocking them both to the alley below. One of them hit an open waste bin with a back-breaking clang.

I didn't know which had become scarier, hellhounds or Xenith who could take them down with her *hooves.*

"Thank ya kindly, Velvet!" Calamity stepped back up to the floating bundle and gave it a kick. The cloud unfurled, rolling outward like a carpet, stretching over the street below.

Three more hellhounds pulled themselves onto the rooftop. Velvet Remedy backed up and let out a song, hitting that perfect high note. All three hellhounds clutched at their ears. Two stopped, backing up to the edge of the wall. One climbed back over the side while the other backed up a step too far, her arms pirouetting comically as she fell backwards off the roof.

The third lurched forward, striking at Velvet Remedy in a half-blind swipe. Velvet jumped away. Her right foreleg did not, falling to the rooftop in a spreading puddle of blood. Velvet's note ended in a strangled whimper as she lifted her right foreleg, eyes locked on where the stump ended inches above where her right knee should have been.

The hellhound drew back her paw, one claw wet with Velvet Remedy's blood. Four bolts of magical energy struck her in the offending paw. The female hellhound glowed and liquefied.

"Velvet!"

I screamed in horror. Calamity dashed to the charcoal-coated unicorn's side, catching her as she wobbled and fell, her eyes still locked on where her right foreleg should be. "I… can fix this…" she whimpered. Velvet fainted in Calamity's forelegs.

Pyrelight pierced the air with a mournful cry.

NO!

Xenith moved fast, pulling potions from her satchel until she found the right one. She shattered it on the rooftop, commanding our pegasus, "Push her wound into that! Quickly!" It looked like the same pudding that Xenith had given Velvet to stop Calamity's wing from bleeding him dry.

Wrapping Velvet's sundered leg in my magic, I floated it to the pudding and pressed it into the glop as well. "We can fix this," I moaned with determination. "She can fix this. She said so!"

I could hear more hellhounds tearing their way up to the roof from inside and out.

Calamity held Velvet, looking stunned. His eyes glistened; his armor was slick with Velvet's blood. "Calamity, now!" Xenith shouted into his ears, breaking the pegasus from his trance. He shoved the bleeding stump into Xenith's medicinal goop hard enough to make the unconscious Velvet moan.

Turning to me, Calamity commanded, "Xenith, put Li'lpip on muh back. Li'lpip, levitate everypony but me an' yerself. An' don't forget Velvet's leg!" He let Velvet Remedy slide out of his arms and galloped to the cloud carpet, stepping onto it. The cloud held him like it was made of surest steel.

I felt a harsh tug at my mane as Xenith lifted me onto Calamity's back. I winced, but the tears blurring my vision were for Velvet. I floated her limp, maimed body into the air, wrapping her severed limb in my magic as well. And finally, Xenith.

Two hellhounds burst up through the roof hatch. A third dug her way up through the ceiling itself, one of the torn Enclave crates knocking her in the snout as it slid into the hole.

"Let 'm chase us across this!" Calamity broke into a gallop, carrying me over the street on a bed of clouds, my mare friends swooping across the urban canyon, towed by my magic.

The two hellhounds from the hatch dropped to all fours and ran for us, leaping for Calamity and me. They would have landed right behind us, but they fell through the clouds (as was *proper* for creatures and clouds) and dashed themselves on the street below. One got up, dusting himself off, then took one look at the building we were heading onto and turned the other way. The second had broken her neck and never got up again.

* * *

"Ah figure y'all got 'till that beacon shuts up t' scavenge what we c'n get from the hospital," Calamity barked, turning to look back over the walkway of clouds. The hellhounds continued to swarm the Maripony Mining and Administration Building, heedless of our escape. "Ah'll stay here an' get this here whirligig fixed."

"And I… will stay… here," Velvet breathed weakly. "And… protect… Calamity."

"Y'all are gonna protect *me?"* Calamity gave her a politely disbelieving look.

She smiled back with a glare of her own. "If my voice cannot… soothe the savage beasts… it can… at least… send them running."

I hated this plan.

Words could not describe how much I hated this plan. The only things making me agree to this plan were a severe lack of time, an inability to see a better way, and the spark of hope borne from that one hellhound's reaction. A hope that, maybe, the hellhounds had an aversion to the hospital that would protect us.

Turning to Xenith, I motioned her to follow. We had no time to lose, and we now had two major injuries that demanded top tier medical supplies. I prayed to Luna that this place had not been stripped clean already. That somehow, for any reason, this hospital was still well stocked.

"Ah crap," Calamity said, still staring across the cloud bridge. I turned in alarm, my stomach dropping. Oh Goddesses, please, not anything else! Please!

"Ah left muh helmet."

I wanted to buck him *so* hard. "Leave it. You look better without it anyway!" A thought struck me. "Can you still shoot those rifles without the helmet's interface?"

"Nope."

That sinking feeling was reinforced. "How many shots do you have left for Spitfire's Thunder?"

"Ah'll swap t' a fresh clip, but Ah've only got three. Plus the two shots left in the current one."

More than he'd have time to fire if he was shooting alone. I looked to Velvet Remedy bleakly.

"Go, Pip. I'll take care of him," Velvet insisted. Pyrelight landed next to her, puffing out her breast and looking fierce.

I nodded before looking back to Calamity and then to the candy-colored heap that was the *Griffinchaser II.* "Can you fix her?"

"Ayep. Positive. Now *go!*"

Pyrelight gave me a heartbreaking look.

Xenith was already waiting for me at the rooftop access doors. I nodded one last time, praying to the Goddesses that this was not the last time I would see them alive, then galloped silently away.

* * *

Xenith and I made our way through crumbling grey hallways with peeling yellow wainscoting. Motes of dust floated in the air. Occasional debris rained from the ceiling.

I took the lead, moving quickly and stealthily, checking rooms. My E.F.S. insisted that there were numerous enemies inside the hospital, lurking somewhere ahead and behind us. From my experience in Stable Twenty-Four, I suspected they were all on the level below.

It hit me as unfair that even with the signal, there would still be hellhounds inside this place hunting us. But as I prepared to curse the heavens (wondering if perhaps I should be cursing the *stars*), I remembered Calamity and the bloatsprite in the closet. The curse died with a chuckle as I realized we were probably surrounded by hostile insects. Bloatsprites or radroaches… or whatever radroaches became in the presence of Taint.

As I turned down a hallway, my ears perked at the sound of a blessedly familiar "male" voice:

> *"Who says you can't go home again? That tenacious mare from Stable Two sure did, and saved her whole damn home from a vicious and unprovoked attack from Steel Rangers who intended to slaughter the Stable's entire population and set up shop. But this time, children, the Stable Dweller had help! That's right! Our Bringer of Light in this dark and cruel world has stirred the hearts of other ponies. And not just ponies, but griffins too. Even ghouls put a hoof to the cause!*
>
> *"I tell you, children: this is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in the Equestrian Wasteland. The people, ponies and non-ponies alike, have witnessed our Heroine selflessly helping those around her, and many of us have taken her example to heart. And when our Wasteland Savior needed us the most, we stepped up!*
>
> *"Now I ask each and every one of you, and this is a question straight from DJ Pon3's heart to yours: when the opportunity comes, will you step up too?"*

I felt myself flush, but this time the embarrassment was buried under a heartburst of love for the grey unicorn behind that voice. Her words were like the beam from a lighthouse in my storm of darkness.

> *"Let me tell you of some of the ponies who did step up. Because you are not going to believe this! The Steel Rangers, a saddle-full of them at any rate, decided to buck their Elders and pledge themselves to helping out the suffering folk of this Equestrian Wasteland! You heard me right, children. Some of those metal-clad powerhouses are*

> *on our side now!*
>
> *"That ain't easy. And their Elders have ordered them hunted down. I have reports of Steel Rangers and Steel Ranger Outcasts fighting in the streets from Manehattan to Trottingham. But I've also got amazing reports of these Outcasts taking down raider hovels and galloping to the aid of caravans. So if you should happen to see one of those new Outcast Knights or Paladins, give them your thanks. And maybe a little ammo."*

I felt both thankful and hurt as I thought of SteelHooves and those who now followed him. Embattled in the streets, fighting for their lives because they chose not to follow ponies who were selfish and evil. The pony in my head wondered what would happen if the pegasi ever learned the truth about this world below them. Would they seek to help, only to have their leaders turn upon them?

I moved forward, following the voice, nudging open the door to the office where an old radio sat, dusty and neglected, the face above the dial still glowing as the speakers gave DJ Pon3's voice a slightly tinny echo.

> *"One last thing, and this is to the Stable Dweller herself. Another message from my assistant… but don't worry, children. I read it this time and it's perfectly chaste…"*

I froze, my mind conjuring everything from another devastatingly embarrassing promise to another warning as soul-breaking as the warning about Stable Two.

> *"She says: Wherever you are right now, I'm thinking of you. Look up at the darkness of the night sky, and know that I am looking up into the same darkness with you. We are never apart, no matter how far your drive to help us all takes you from this place. For you are here in my heart, always.*
>
> *"I love you, Littlepip."*

I felt my heart gush, bursting with joy.

> *"Aw… now ain't that just romantic? Don't that just tug at your heartstrings? When did my assistant get so cheesy? Oh, and there's a P.S.: Thirty-one. Huh. What's thirty-one mean?"*

My mind simply went blank. I was drowning in embarrassment, burning alive from the heat that suddenly flushed through my body.

"Oh dear," Xenith intoned behind me, her exotic voice holding not a trace of actual sympathy. She leaned forward and whispered into my ear, "I should tell Velvet Remedy so that she does not hear it first from strangers, no?"

I collapsed, dying of sheer humiliation. Homage had banished me to a world of embarrassment, and Xenith had imprisoned me in a dungeon of anticipated torment in that world I had been banished to.

It wasn't until hours later that I realized Xenith's words carried with them the implicit hope that Velvet Remedy would survive. By making me certain Velvet would soon be teasing me endlessly, Xenith dispelled my fear that I was about to lose her.

⁂

The medical cabinet opened with ease, the lock hardly a worthy challenge. Xenith began to collect the medicines and healing bandages inside. So far, the hospital had been a treasure trove of lesser supplies but had not yielded the more potent potions we were desperately searching for. I looked across the room filled with rotting beds, tattered partitions and toppled IV stands. A night wind blew through broken windows, making the curtains dance like ghosts. The foul scent of a hundred hellhounds drifted through the room. I glanced outside and saw them crawling all over the building across from us like a swarm of bees.

I wondered why they didn't just destroy the array. But maybe they couldn't. Maybe there was something in the pulse that didn't allow them to. Still, with that many trying to clamber onto the roof, it was only a matter of time before they destroyed it just by accident.

I looked the other way, out the door. There was a nurses' station across the hall. No red lights on my E.F.S. I let Xenith know where I was headed and slipped out. Pressing an ear to the door, I thought I heard a snake-like hiss. I checked my E.F.S. again, but there were no threats.

The door was locked. Again, it was hardly a challenge. But when I tried to push the door open, it didn't want to budge. I shoved, throwing my weight against it, and heard a crash from inside as the door opened half a yard. Dust and old plaster blasted out of the opening. A fast clicking burst from my PipBuck.

I poked my head through, coughing, and saw that the ceiling had collapsed, filling most of the room. Broken terminals and office supplies littered the floor around large hunks of structural material. I could see partially into the room above where a bathtub teetered, hanging from the washroom above only by the plumbing. Water sprayed out of a crack in the pipes, soaking the rubble of the floor below and draining down into the level beneath us through a section of the nurses' station floor which had given way from decades of water damage.

There wasn't much room inside, but I saw that I could reach a locked metal cabinet with the word "CONFISCATED" written in large red letters. I removed my saddlebags and squeezed in through the opening.

The metal cabinet proved a tougher lock. Within my skills but still a worthy challenge. Enough that I felt a touch of pride as it opened. Inside were drugs. Buck, Dash, Mint-als and a variety of powerful painkillers, as well as other pills and powders which I did not recognize. There were other things too. A memory orb. A knife with a blade that shimmered with an unnatural purple sheen. A copy of *Zebra Infiltration Tactics.* I floated my saddlebags to me. With a telekinetic push, I dumped the entire contents into one of them.

A tin of Party-Time Mint-als landed on the top. My heart skipped a beat.

I wrapped the tin with a magical sheath.

Do we really have time for this? the little pony in my head asked. *Hurry. We can dump it later.*

I knew she was lying.

I knew I needed to get rid of it now. If I carried it around with me, the temptation to take one when things got bad might be more than I could bear.

Oh come on. You're stronger than that, the pony insisted. And I was, wasn't I?

Or… what if Xenith could use it for a potion or something? It would be a shame to waste it.

Dammit, I was taking too much time! I closed the saddlebags, floating them out ahead of me. I slithered out of the nurses' station.

I'd been so distracted by my inner struggle that I didn't even notice the red light at the very edge of my E.F.S. compass.

* * *

There were no Goddesses! There couldn't be for what I was seeing to be allowed to exist.

The… *thing* that shuffled down the hall before me had clearly once been meant to be a pony. There was enough pony left in its face to tell that horrifying truth. There was no way to describe the vile, sickening body of the thing – the best my brain could manage was the idea that a pony had started to melt, losing all her fur and keeping only sporatic tuffs of her mane and tail, only for the flesh beneath to stop melting (arbitrarily and not all at once) and then begin to bloat and metastasize. Its eyes, sunken and huge and red, stared into mine. Its tongue had swollen and stretched, bursting out of its muzzle and splitting into tendrils as they hung down from the wreckage that had once been its mouth. The tentacles writhed individually, as if in great pain.

I was petrified by the sight, rooted to the floor with no ability or will to move. I wanted to run screaming as that split tongue undulated and whipped out, stretching the length of the hall, each wrapping wetly around one of my hooves. I fell, dragged forward towards the squirming flesh-blob, my gaze locked onto its eyes. I tried again to scream, but somehow it had stolen my voice.

The tongues lifted me over the mass of writhing, furless tissue. As another tongue-tentacle pushed out of its muzzle, the tentacles twisted me over, my eyes turned to the ceiling, and my paralysis broke. I thrashed, letting out a scream of terror.

The tongues were impossibly strong. I could not pull my hooves free. It continued to rotate me until I faced away from it, the hallway behind me upside-down. I witnessed Xenith dash out of the room to save me… then stop, eyes wide and locked in place.

I felt that new tongue slither across me, and I realized with abject terror that the flesh-blob did not intend to *kill* me…

"NO!" I screamed in a mix of fury and primal panic. *"NOnono"* **BLAM!!** *"nonono"* **BLAM!!** *"nononono!!!"* **BLAM!!** My screams were punctuated by the fury of Little Macintosh as I made my weapon fire blindly into the mass of living flesh.

I was hit by a cloying reek. I felt the tongues go slack, dropping me. I hit the creature – its body felt like a warm and slimy bean-bag chair with grotesque muscle and sinew hidden beneath – and bounced onto the floor. I scrambled away. I felt sickened, loathing my body where I had touched it.

"Oh Littlepip, I'm so sorry," Xenith cried out, galloping up to me.

I got shakily to my hooves. Little Macintosh's bullets had torn gaping holes in the meat of the thing. "W-w-what is *t-that?!*"

"I do not know," Xenith said fearfully. "But we must be cautious. There may be more of them, and they possess a Stare."

* * *

We moved through the rows of the hospital pharmacy. Our hooves left tracks through the spilled powders that covered the floor. Many of the stacks had partially collapsed, spilling their contents onto the tiles below.

I waved the lamp of my PipBuck over the barely legible labels on a shelf which still held little jars of unsullied medical treasures. Xenith trotted up, a sack held in her teeth which she had found in the housekeeping section behind us. She scooped a seemingly random choice of the tiny jars into the sack with a hoof. I didn't know if any of these would help either Calamity or Velvet Remedy, but I had learned to trust in the value of Xenith's alchemy and brewing.

We both froze at the sick shuffling sound of another of the flesh blobs. Dropping the sack, Xenith moved towards the pharmacy counter as I moved to the pharmacy door.

Xenith pushed herself up, peering over the counter cautiously. And didn't move. Every muscle in her body was locked in place. I could hear the softest sound strangling in her throat as the slick tongues of the thing in the room beyond distended and stretched to start wrapping around her.

I darted out of the pharmacy and around the corner, getting the barest glimpse of the creature before squeezing my eyes furiously shut and firing several bursts from the zebra rifle into where the creature had just been. I heard an unearthly squeal and was assaulted by the acrid stench of the thing's bulbous flesh burning away. I opened my eyes to see Xenith wrench herself free from the limp appendages as the fire climbed up them towards her. She barely avoided being burned.

"Sorry," I said with a grimace as we both coughed and gagged, mentally noting that the zebra rifle was no longer to be used against these… or for that matter any Tainted creature considering my run of luck when pairing the two.

Xenith tied off her bag and I helped tie it to her across from her satchel. Together, we moved to the nearby stairwell, not taking the time to peek in the garbage bins. This was already taking far longer than I was comfortable with. And that discomfort didn't even include the creepy itching that was starting to spread inside me.

According to the old paint, the next floor down was the emergency care and operating rooms. They were our best bet for extra-strength restoration potions.

* * *

You had to sneak up on them from behind, we quickly learned. To look the slithering flesh-mounds in the face was to be paralyzed, body and mind. We did not know if those *things* could affect more than one mare at a time, but neither Xenith nor I were foolish enough to risk it.

They were, however, the opposite of hellhounds in many ways. They were slow, stupid monstrosities, possessing no tactical skill, driven by only the basest urges. And their flesh was weak. Even a low-caliber bullet would cause great, stinking ruptures in their tuberous bodies.

We made it to the surgical level. Benches lined the wall of what had been a small waiting room, rotted periodicals stained the floor. There were a few pony skeletons here, two with cracked pelvic bones. An ill shudder racked me as it occurred to me that the poor mares had not been killed by the horror which had invaded them, but the horror that had come out.

Beyond the waiting room was a hallway which ended in a swinging pair of double doors. Midway down the hall were two heavy, vault-like doors, each with a wall-mounted terminal. One of these was the medical supply room for the floor. The sign above the other simply said “ISOLATION”. The one bright point was that the hospital seemed entirely unscavenged. There was no sign of hellhound claws. It was no mystery anymore why they shunned this place.

“Oh dear, oh dear,” came a slightly tinny voice from the other side of the swinging operating room doors. My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was picking up two entities, one of which was a non-hostile presence. The other glowed red on the compass. “Misses Tulip, I’m afraid you’ve come down with a serious case of death. I’m afraid this is beyond my meager skills, but I do recommend plenty of bed rest and I will alert the next available doctor to your condition.”

The two of us crept down the hall, stopping at the terminals. The one to the medical supply room was dead, leaving me to pick the lock telekinetically.

“Good afternoon Mister Tester,” said the oddly cheery voice. “I’m pleased to see some of your color has returned. Let me change your IV tubes for you. No, no, don’t fuss. You’ll only make this harder. The straps are for your own good.”

The tumblers moved, sliding reluctantly into place and the medical supply room opened. I pointed my PipBuck lamp into the dark space, hoping fervently for a spot of luck. Inside were racks of collapsed shelving. A metal cabinet had pulled free from the wall and fallen, catching on a counter edge. The doors had swung open, its contents spilling and shattering on the floor.

Xenith took a guarding position as I stepped inside. Moving like prey, with any luck we would be in and out before either of the entities in the other room noticed our passing.

There was one cabinet that looked fairly intact, but from the stains around the bottom of the door, the insides had not fared as well as the exterior.

My heart sank into my stomach and started to die.

Outside, the chipper voice said, “Miss Sunshower, dear, let me put that back on for you. You’ll never heal if you keep losing your head like that.”

My hooves felt terribly heavy as I approached the cabinet. It was locked, and the lock was a tricky one. It took a few tries to open, but that was due in part to the numb dread that was creeping through me.

“Really, is the cleaning staff completely lazy? Just look at the state of this room. Hardly sanitary. If a Ministry of Peace inspector were to show up, somepony would be out of a job.”

I wanted to gallop out, find the source of the voice and buck it to death. Instead, I opened the cabinet door.

Jackpot.

⁂

Xenith was carefully putting each of the healing poultices and extra-strength restoration potions we had found into my saddle bags. We had found less than I had hoped for, but hopefully more than enough. In addition, there was a smaller lockbox which had proven far trickier to open. Inside was an advanced medical spell matrix.

I floated the arcano-tech device, a peripheral with intricately enchanted gemstone in the center, out of its box and carried it with me. "I'll be right back," I told Xenith, scanning my E.F.S. once again to make sure no other hostiles were in the area.

Xenith kept watch, ready to pull me back as I crept forward towards the operating room doors. I moved as stealthily as possible, Little Macintosh floating close to me. If the red light on my E.F.S. was another of those horrors, I didn't want it to have the time to turn my way. I hoped it wasn't already facing the door.

I nudged open the door and looked around. The operating room was full of gurneys, most of which bore the skeleton of a pony. A few were empty. And one held the bloated, fleshy body of one of the horrors. It was strapped down with an IV needle jabbed into it. The IV tube was less than a yard long and dangled off the creatures' bulbous mass, the other end attached to nothing.

A bright yellow, multi-limbed medical bot hovered from gurney to gurney, "helping" its patients.

The blob of flesh wiggled. I unloaded four shots into it, Little Macintosh echoing throughout the floor. The horror seemed to deflate, filling the air with an awful, fetid stench like bile and sewage.

I had to turn away, covering my muzzle with my hoof, my eyes watering. I galloped back down the hall, stopping in the waiting room and vomiting violently. The acidic taste of bile in my mouth was actually preferable to the smell of the horror's innards.

I swallowed and wiped my muzzle, feeling faint. I turned back, trotting to the door again, bracing myself for the suffocating reek. I pushed in, holding my breath as long as I could, and snuck towards the malfunctioning medical bot.

I could reprogram it, I believed, routing around the corrupted sectors of its programming. And with the advanced medical spell matrix, it would not only have the medical expertise to help, but be able to utilize a small number of medical spells. Perhaps even ones that Velvet Remedy could learn from it. In the very least, it would be an asset to Junction R-7. At best, it could help Velvet Remedy re-attach her severed foreleg.

But all that was for later, the trip back.

Right now, I just needed to shut it off.

* * *

I walked out of the operating room, my robotic prize wrapped in a magical field and floating next to me. I stopped as I met up with Xenith, and I stared at the vault door beneath the darkened sign reading ISOLATION. The terminal next to this sealed door was glowing softly. The little pony in my head pranced with eager curiosity.

It would only take a minute.

I hooked my hacking tool into it and went to work.

The door clanged internally and slid open. Inside was a small room with filing cabinets, a desk, a glowing terminal… and a huge, reinforced window which looked into a slightly larger chamber. The chamber had a single operating table positioned below a ceiling-mounted robotic medical array. A spider-like mass of arms holding scalpels, bonesaws and torturous-looking medical tools protruded down towards the form still strapped to the table.

It was one of the flesh-horrors. Only this one was dead already, the flesh putrescent. Its tongues had been severed, its body sliced open and partially dissected.

There was one other difference. Stretched and distorted over the rear of this aberration's mutated flesh was the deformed remnants of a cutie mark.

I heard somepony gasp in horror. I think it was me.

The observation room was virtually untouched by the centuries. The quake from the megaspell had cracked the window, but it had held. The paint on the walls was peeling. The ceiling sagged a little, covered in spider-web cracks. The room beyond however, was missing a corner. The ragged edges suggested massive water damage. I wondered if this was caused by the split in the pipes above the nurse's station, but there was similar damage in many parts of the building.

I approached the room's terminal and hacked into it. There was one audio file still remaining. The others had been corrupted or purged. I asked it to play, and a mare's voice, a ghost from the past, came from an overhead speaker.

> *"This is Sunny Days, Maripony consultant to the Ministry of Arcane Science. It is now two days since the accident that ended Peachy Pie's life as we knew it. Eighteen hours since I had to order the brain stem of… this thing severed. Previous attempts to put the creature down through lethal injection proved futile. Even now, we are still reading life signs; this thing just does not want to die. But there is no brain function anymore and hopefully the rest of the body will get the hint. I've ordered the autopsy halted until then.*
>
> *"I take comfort in knowing that my childhood friend died two days ago, and that there was nothing of her in this… abomination.*
>
> *"I finally managed to get an audience with Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle. I have learned that the Ministry of Arcane Science is using my old facility to craft something called the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. According to Twilight Sparkle, this IMP will likely become the deciding factor in the war. It is clearly her hope that through magical augmentation, we can bring the war to a swift conclusion. The zebras have been engaging in mystical and alchemical augmentations for years now, and it sounds to me like the Ministry of Arcane Science is determined to beat them at their own game.*
>
> *"I questioned Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle about the contents of the barrels now being stored in the caverns underneath Splendid Valley. She revealed that these barrels contain effectively the very same transformative magical brew that the Ministry of Arcane Science is testing for use on pony volunteers.*
>
> *"According to the Ministry Mare, the process for creating IMP is extremely delicate and demanding. And apparently, her standards are even more so. Any batch that is flawed in any way, any batch that is not absolutely optimal, is sealed up and discarded. In Twilight Sparkle's own words, if she is going to ask ponies to trust their bodies to IMP-induced transformation, how could she dare give them anything but the most perfect version of the potion possible?*
>
> *"The Ministry Mare was absolutely horrified to hear of the accident, and appalled as I told her what had happened to Peachy Pie. She put a strict moratorium on any further attempts to move the barrels. It looks like Ministry Mare Fluttershy is going*

to have to find a different avenue of negotiation with the Diamond Dogs.

"Personally, at this point, I'm tempted to just start shooting them. I know that's horrible of me, but I've just spent two days seeing the best friend I ever knew reduced to… something worse than any nightmare. And all because we're trying to appease a bunch of Dogs.

"The worst part is that part of me blames Peachy Pie. She shouldn't have been down there. She'd come to work sick the last four mornings. I told her to take sick leave. Practically ordered her to. But she never could stand to be doing nothing. Part of me wonders if she slipped, or if her judgment was slightly impaired. And I hate myself for asking that. She deserves better.

"Peachy Pie was the best friend anypony could ever have.

"Her husband is outside. He wants to see the body. I have no idea what to tell him. All I know is that I can't, absolutely can't, let him see this."

⁂

I stumbled out of the isolation room and collapsed against the wall, breathing heavily.

"Littlepip?" Xenith asked, her voice deep with concern. She had heard Sunny Day's recording too, and I could see the sadness in her eyes and hear it in her voice. But she didn't know what I knew, didn't realize what I did. She could tell the recording was affecting me far more than it did her even if she could not sense the revelation behind it.

Taint on the other hoof, Homage had said as DJ Pon3, *is a zebra of very different stripes. Nopony knows exactly what the taint is or where it comes from, but we know its mutative effects on monsters and the fatally malignant repercussions on ponies.*

I knew what Taint was. I knew where it came from.

I know that as you travel, as you poke your nose into places and memories, you're going to hear things or learn things about my Twi, Spike had warned me painfully.

Taint was IMP: Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. This was Twilight Sparkle's *other* legacy.

But that wasn't being fair. Twilight Sparkle had been a good pony with a good heart. Of course the M.A.S. hub in Manehattan had been working on a spell to clean Taint, and it was no longer a surprise that they had been successful when everypony since (like that insane ghoul doctor) had failed. Twilight Sparkle knew exactly what Taint was, after all. She knew every component that went into it. And after what happened to Peachy Pie, she was not going to be content to just leave that kind of dangerous magical toxin in barrels underground. She was working to clean it up. Of course the Gardens of Equestria would include the spell to purge Taint from the land. I suspected that Twilight Sparkle would have created a Taint-purging megaspell and set it off over Splendid Valley… just as soon as pony testing of IMP had proven successful.

The only variable is, well, dosage.

Twilight Sparkle's words floated back to me. The IMP experiment at Maripony required a very tightly controlled dosage. Who knew what the effects of too little would be? The deep itch that had now spread through my entire torso told me I would likely soon learn.

But that was when they discovered that Twilight's magical… byproducts, shall we say, have *started eating through the barrels,* Rarity had told Rainbow Dash. *Sunny lost a pony trying to move them when several tore open like they were made of nothing but the covering paint.*

That horror, on the other side of that window, was what became of anypony who suffered massive exposure. If that creature had been created from a few barrels, I was thankful that I had never seen Trixie herself inside that vat.

And if you got it just right? That was how Trixie was creating the alicorns. I wondered how long had it taken her to find the correct amount, and how many failed experiments had she cannibalized before she struck on the perfect dose?

My eyes went to the hole in the corner of the far chamber. Peachy Pie had been sick each morning for days. The medical equipment was still picking up anomalous life signs after the creature should have been dead.

I knew where the other horrors had come from.

* * *

Xenith and I galloped all the way back to the roof. I slammed through the door, stumbling and panting. “We’ve got… what we… came for!”

Velvet Remedy was looking decidedly bad, but I thanked the Goddesses that she was conscious. Calamity stood at the edge of the building, looking down. I noticed his helmet in his mouth. He had run across and gotten it!

That meant…

I looked to the building across from us. All the hellhounds were gone. The antenna array was smashed to pieces. I crept to the edge, casting a glance first to the *Griffinchaser II.* It still looked like a mess, but I could see the work Calamity had done.

Calamity set down his helmet. “In case y’all missed it, they’re tellin’ us t’ surrender.”

Looking down, I saw the hellhounds surrounding the building, some carrying energy weapons. A few dozen carrying torches. Most were armed only with their claws. Standing on a dilapidated wagon was one particularly large female hellhound holding a megaphone.

“You come down now!” she barked, her voice carrying, “Final chance!”

I had really hoped we could treat Calamity’s wing and Velvet Remedy’s leg here. But that was no longer an option. “Come on, Calamity. Let’s go.”

“Ah don’t get why they ain’t swarmed us yet.”

Grimly, I answered, “I do. And trust me, you are much happier not knowing.”

He turned from the edge, picking up his helmet again and walking towards Velvet Remedy. His eyes looked older than they had the day before.

“Not… your… fault,” Velvet Remedy insisted to the pegasus as he laid down next to her.

He set down the helmet and nuzzled the charcoal unicorn. “Yes it is. Ah’m the one who got ’is wing shot. An’ Ah’m the one who wanted t’ snipe the hellhounds. Y’all faced alla this shit t’ help me. An’ Ah ain’t gonna forget that. Not ever.”

Suddenly the whole building shook. A thunderous rending boiled up from beneath us. A massive fissure tore across the roof a few yards back from the south side edge, and the entire southern wall of the hospital collapsed with a monstrous roar.

Luna-eclipsing orgasms! The Goddess-damned hellhounds were taking out the fucking foundation!

"Out of time, everypony!" I shouted as I climbed onto the *Griffinchaser II* and tried to figure out how to operate the earth pony contraption. Thankfully, it seemed rather simple. While the mechanics used a spark battery-augmented assist, the whole thing was basically pedal-powered.

"And zebra!" I added. "Gather together. We're leaving!"

More of the building began to collapse. The roof canted, and the *Griffinchaser II* began to slide towards the ragged edge.

I wrapped everyone else in a field of magic, making sure to include the medical bot, Velvet Remedy's leg, Calamity's helmet and Xenith's sack of medicines; I started to peddle as hard as I could.

The gears and belts and chains of the *Griffinchaser II* squealed in protest. The blades began to spin.

With a horrendous rumble, the hospital roof fell away beneath us, the hospital collapsing into billowing clouds of smoke and debris.

We didn't fall with it. The clouds of dust puffed up at us. Slowly, getting a feel for the flying contraption, I turned us towards Maripony and the *Sky Bandit.*

* * *

After everything that had come before, there was nothing I could do.

Xenith was brewing a potion, using a mix of her own supplies and the chemicals we had just gathered. I could smell the odd scents coming from the pot she held over the cookfire. Xenith told us this would augment Velvet Remedy's own healing, allowing her leg to heal fully and properly once it was reattached. It would also permanently alter her, much like previous brews had altered me. Somehow, while such enhancements should be viewed as a gift, this felt like a sacrifice. A final step in severing Velvet Remedy from who she was before. After this, she really wouldn't be the same pony anymore.

Calamity had refused to leave Velvet Remedy's side the entire time I had spent reprogramming the medical bot. (While I was at it, I'll admit that I changed the robot's name. Considering what its next operation would be, I didn't feel "Sawbones" was particularly appropriate.)

Now it was up to the medical bot and Velvet Remedy to treat both her and Calamity. I could only sit back and watch. And I didn't think I could bear to do that.

We were, for the moment, safe. The alicorns were creating a perimeter around Maripony, and the hellhounds seemed to be taking the rest of the night off. I pulled up my PipBuck's inventory sorting spell, looking for the memory orb I had found in the hospital. I was shocked to find a tin of Party-Time Mint-als amongst my supplies. For a moment, I couldn't remember how it had gotten there. I ordered the inventory sorter to bury it at the bottom of the saddlebags. The little pony in my head, once an advocate of keeping them, now nickered at me in disappointment. Stupid, inconsistent little pony.

I floated out the orb, laying it on a chunk of rubble in front of me. Then quickly captured it again as it started to roll. Finding a better place to set it, I focused directly on the orb with my magic.

The world melted away.

* * *

The world smelled of scented lotions and effervescent fragrances. The floor beneath me was comfortable; my flanks lounged into plush carpeting. I felt warmth and weight pressed against me from the mare wrapped in my forelegs. Her tears soaked into my coat over my breast.

I could hear the pony crying. And behind that, soft, tinkling music from somewhere up above. And in the other room a familiar mare's voice was saying, "I mean, that's wonderful news, right? Why don't you sound happy?"

The pony in my forelegs had the gentlest yellow coat, a flowing pink mane, and was Fluttershy.

"…but I do deserve it," Fluttershy mumbled against my breast, her body hitching with sobs. "I…"

The legs holding Fluttershy had an elegant white coat that was getting mussed, and I was Rarity.

Rarity felt weak from barely contained sadness, an exhaustion I knew all too well. Her eyes burned on the edge of tears, but she was holding them back, remaining strong for the yellow pegaus in her embrace.

Fluttershy wailed meekly, "I *am* a traitor!"

"I don't believe that," I heard my host say gently. "Rainbow Dash was…"

Fluttershy turned her face up to me, her eyes overflowing with tears. "Rarity. I gave megaspells to the zebras."

I felt my host tense, her eyes growing wide. But still she didn't let Fluttershy go. She held her, her voice shocked but her tone non-judgmental as she asked, "Why would you do that?"

Fluttershy gave a wretched squeak as she felt Rarity tense. Her expression told me she expected to be rejected. Pushed away. Maybe worse. But there was a tone of resolve in her voice when she answered.

"To stop the war."

Rarity shook her head. "How?"

"You remember the test. I have healing spells that megaspells will let heal almost anything. Zebras have potions that allow them to regenerate wounds, and a megaspell will make their whole army like that. Have you seen Twilight's new shield spell? A megaspell shield could protect a whole city."

Fluttershy looked at her unicorn friend, fierce determination shining behind those large eyes that were swimming in tears. "If both sides had megaspells, we wouldn't be able to kill each other anymore. They'd *have* to stop fighting."

I felt Rarity shudder, a knot forming in her throat. The tears she had been holding back began to flow. She knew, I could tell, that such was not the way either side would use this gift. "Oh Fluttershy…" As the first tear raced down her right cheek, Rarity leaned forward, brushing aside the flowing pink mane that obscured most of Fluttershy's face, and planted a kiss on the pegasus pony's forehead. "…You always were the best of us."

She hugged the pegasus tighter. "Never, ever regret what you've done, darling." She held Fluttershy's head against her breast so the pegasus could not see her weeping.

In the background, I could hear the other voice saying, "What? Oh, oh no. My sister is fine. We're…" I recognized the voice of Sweetie Belle now. "We're at that spa on Leaf Fall Lane. Rarity's been here all afternoon trying to get Fluttershy to stop crying."

Fluttershy shuddered, whimpering, "Rarity? I… I can't breathe." Her meek, hesitant tone suggested that she'd accept it if Rarity just kept squeezing her.

Rarity let go quickly. "Oh… Fluttershy, I'm so sorry." She got up, quickly turning away before the pegasus could see her tears. "I need to freshen up a bit. Will you be okay until I get back?"

Fluttershy squeaked but nodded.

My host trotted quickly for the little mare's room. On the way, she passed an anxious-looking spa pony. Stopping, Rarity whispered, "Remember, you're closed. I'm very sorry, and the Ministry of Image will pay you triple your lost earnings, but we really can't be disturbed right now."

Before the spa pony could respond, Rarity nearly galloped the rest of the way, pushing through the door to the ladies restroom. As the door swung shut behind her, I could hear Sweetie Belle saying, "Fluttershy says that Rainbow Dash called her a traitor!"

Rarity's nerves felt fried. She was shedding tears, and it was making it difficult to see, but the sight of her in the mirror looked sad and terrified. Her horn was glowing, and something floated out of her side-purse. She wiped her eyes with a forehoof to better see the framed picture.

It was the Ministry Mares. All together, looking much younger… maybe my age. They were looking disheveled but happy, wearing once-elegant dresses that appeared to have been worn through a wrestling match. There was Spike too, but not Spike as I had ever known or imagined him. Baby Spike! They were all gathered around a round table covered in what looked like donut crumbs.

"I… I don't think I can take this anymore. I was n-nothing before you. You're th-the best friends a p-pony could h-have. The best ponies ever…" Rarity choked up. "A-and it feels like I'm l-losing all of you!"

Rarity's whole body shuddered. She looked up at the mirror and was shocked by what she saw. Turning on the sink, she splashed water onto her face and tried to wash away any trace of her sadness. Looking back up, she drew herself up tall. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Rarity! Fluttershy needs you!"

Her horn glowed again, opening her purse and lifting up the picture.

The door pushed open. Rarity turned, a natural-looking smile already forced onto her muzzle. Her eyes widened upon seeing Sweetie Belle looking mournful.

"Sis, I'm sorry to interrupt but…"

"Yes?" Rarity said with hopeful cheer I know she didn't feel.

"Applejack's been in an… accident."

I could feel Rarity's body tense. "An accident? Is she all right?"

"She's in a coma, but the doctors say she'll recover," Sweetie Belle told her sister regretfully.

At the word coma, Rarity's magic imploded, the framed picture dropping to the floor with a clatter.

"Apple Bloom says Twilight Sparkle's on her way to see them. She wants to know if you and Fluttershy can come see Applejack too.”

Rarity swayed. Forcing her voice to not waver, she informed her little sister, “Of course we will! Fluttershy and I will head to Manehattan right away.” She gave her sister a smile, “And will you be coming too?”

Sweetie Belle nodded. “I’ve already made arrangements. There’s a train leaving in an hour.” The younger unicorn slipped back out, closing the door behind her. “I’ll see you there.”

The moment Rarity was alone again, the usually elegant unicorn swayed on the verge of fainting. As she braced herself against the sink, her eyes fell to the picture on the floor. A slight crack now ran down the glass, separating Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy from Rainbow Dash and Twilight Sparkle.

The unicorn mare whimpered softly. Her magic wrapped around the picture and tucked it back into her purse, then drew out a familiar headset. She touched her hoof to the earbloom.

Rarity turned to the mirror, looking at herself. A look of sad determination crossed her face.

A voice crackled over the earbloom. “Hello? Ministry of Image, Mistress Rarity’s office.

“This is Rarity. Contact the Ministry’s top magician. Tell him I’ve changed my mind and I will need his services on that special project after all.”

* * *

The trip back was a long and occasionally eventful one, but it was only in trying to look back on it afterwards that things became strange.

Calamity’s wing had mended beautifully, but at our insistence he made regular stops to rest. Velvet Remedy fared both better and worse. Her foreleg was encased in a thick, rigid cast that prevented her from walking; she was extremely weak and in dire need of rest and recovery.

“Velvet, go to sleep,” Xenith intoned, carefully using our unicorn companion’s name. “*Breath of the Phoenix* takes time to do its work.”

“Goddesses, Velvet,” I chimed in, “You’re worse than… well, all of us when you give us medical pony’s orders.”

Velvet Remedy ignored us, instead cooing at Pyrelight and nuzzling her wing softly. “Hear that, Pyrelight darling? Xenith’s little brew has made me part phoenix. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“It is just a name,” Xenith sighed.

Velvet Remedy continued to play with Pyrelight who fluttered about my beautiful friend with unconcealed joy at her survival. The balefire phoenix kept perching on Velvet’s cast, which I couldn’t imagine was really helping.

I itched. And I really didn’t like that. I swore to myself that the very first thing I would do upon returning to Tenpony Tower was find Homage and promise whatever I had to in order to get that Taint-purging spell cast on me. I feared it might already be too late.

Well, second thing. First thing would be to set my friends up in a luxury suite where Velvet could get some damn rest. "If you don't go right to bed when we get to Tenpony, I swear I'm going to tie you to the bed."

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened. Then narrowed as she gave me a sultry look. "Oh Littlepip, you tease. But really, that's your kink, not mine."

I sputtered. It was most definitely not my kink.

Thankfully, Velvet Remedy turned her spotlight on Xenith. "Yesterday when that siren went off, were you hearing it just in your ears?" Velvet Remedy asked.

The zebra gave her an odd look. I didn't blame her, finding the question equally strange until I heard Xenith's answer: "How else would I be hearing that dreadful noise?" She seemed to consider, "I have felt sounds before, low vibrating rumbles, but this was no such sound."

Velvet Remedy nodded and looked to the rest of us. It took me a moment, but when the realization hit me, it seemed so obvious that…

* * *

…I was looking down the scope of Little Macintosh as the zombie-pony came into view. A slight squeeze of the trigger and Little Macintosh roared. The creature's head exploded.

I turned, checking for any more of the flesh-eating zombies, but my E.F.S. compass was clean of red. I floated my weapon away, feeling a pang. It was tragic and terrible that these zombies were once living ponies who had become trapped, imprisoned in decaying bodies and minds, slowly tortured by the rotting insanity that turned them into mindless monsters bent on devouring other ponies. Yet part of me remembered all too horrifically that there were even worse fates.

I turned back to eating my soup. The others were settling back down to dinner as well. Twilight was fading. The ruins of the old power substation loomed about us. We had chosen it because the crumbling walls would shield the light of our cookfire. Calamity had wanted to push the rest of the way to Manehattan, but yielded to our persuasions.

Xenith stirred the pot again, offering Velvet another helping. Pyrelight had flown off hunting the moment the *Sky Bandit* touched down, and Velvet had been anxious about her since the first zombie-pony appeared.

I heard hoofsteps and a clattering sound approaching, followed by heavy, ragged breathing that didn't sound like any pony. Waving to the others, I floated out the zebra rifle and brought up my E.F.S. again, scanning the area for hostile life. No red, but there were several approaching non-hostile entities. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Several minutes later, the traveling merchant moved into the light of our campfire. Upon seeing us, she froze, eyes darting to each of my (very heavily armed, I suddenly realized) party. The two-headed cattle carrying her wares mooed plaintively behind her.

Calamity flew over, causing the merchant to take a step back. But he was all smiles and a hearty hoofshake. "Howdy there! Been ages since ah've seen any sort o' caravan. Ah'd be much obliged if y'all would join us for soup. Ah promise, it's mighty tasty!"

He leaned forward and whispered loudly, "Ah didn't cook it."

The merchant smiled, the tension in her body melting away. "Thank ya kindly." She hitched her cattle to a trash bin and trotted over to join us. I gasped as a large beast pushed past the cattle and lumbered in after her, growling softly.

"W-what is t-that?" Velvet Remedy stammered, wide eyed.

The merchant laughed. "Oh, don'tcha mind Cuddles. He really is a friendly bear. Unless y'all are raiders." The pony smiled, "A lady can't be wanderin' the wasteland without a friend, y'know. There's some bad folk out there."

"Yao guai," our zebra whispered strangely to Velvet.

"I've… never met such a beast before," Velvet Remedy said, still wide-eyed.

"Well, truth be told, Ah never met neither a pegasus nor a zebra b'fore," the merchant replied good-naturedly as Xenith offered her a bowl of soup. "Thank ya, miss."

"What brings ya out this way?" Calamity asked curiously.

"Doin' the new run 'tween Shattered Hoof an' Manehattan," the merchant pony said with a smile. "Figure Ah outta get in on the new action b'fore everypony does."

Suddenly, Calamity took to the air, darting back to where the Sky Bandit was parked. We all watched as he returned with his saddlebags and started pulling out seemingly random junk. Everything from old boxes of instant mashed potatoes to small-caliber firearms that were, quite frankly, beneath us.

Wait… when exactly did any lethal ranged weapon become *beneath us?*

"Where did you find those?" Velvet Remedy asked. "*When* did you find them? I thought we had sold everything non-essential at Tenpony Tower?"

"Scavengin' Ol Olneigh," Calamity replied as he started to pick the best things to barter with while Velvet Remedy just shook her head. She got up and hobbled over, nudging him aside and rearranging his selection.

"I will now tell you a secret," said Xenith as she leaned close to the pegasus. "It is both possible and permissible to pass by a filing cabinet or garbage barrel without looking inside."

I facehoofed as Calamity turned to her with wide, mock-amazed eyes. "Really? How? Ah ain't learned that trick."

"Obviously."

I found myself smiling at that. A thought struck me. "Hey, Calamity, could we take a swing by Shattered Hoof on our way? I want to talk to Gawd…"

* * *

…I frowned as Velvet Remedy once more submersed herself in the original Fluttershy Orb.

I knew now that SteelHooves hadn't quite been right about the yellow pegasus. But he'd still been close enough for me to worry for my friend. Especially with the strain, physically and mentally, that this week had put Velvet Remedy under.

She'd come chillingly close to dying. Twice. And even if there were no visible scars or lasting physical damage from the loss of her leg, the psychological impact would not heal with magical ease. Her alteration under Xenith's brew showed no outward signs, but I could not imagine that it was not weighing on her as well. All this, on top of the horrors of the Stable Two massacre…

I looked away, tracing my right forehoof over the metal floor of the *Sky Bandit.* We were nearing Shattered Hoof. I could see the lights of it in the darkness.

I pushed my thoughts in other directions, purposefully distracting myself. I thought of the orbs I had seen yesterday. For the life of me, I couldn't imagine how or why the Leaf Fall Lane spa memory had ended up locked in that cabinet. Most of the time, the locations of the memory orbs I found struck me as completely logical. This one did not.

The other orb did, although it took me a while to puzzle it out. The Steel Rangers had likely been trying to make their way to the hospital roof, led by the robed unicorn mare in their party. With the information in that orb, they could have gotten a fix on the location of the central hub of the Single Pegasus Project, whatever that happened to be.

As for Rarity's reason to make a recording of the memory, I chose to believe that the moment Rainbow Dash asked her to design the Enclave armor was a happy moment for her. She was, at heart, a dressmaker. And finally her job and her beloved hobby had united… after a fashion. No pun intended. I could imagine the graceful, elderly unicorn wanting to relive that moment again and again. Especially as things began to fall apart for her friends.

Not unlike Velvet Remedy.

"Okay, Li'lpip," Calamity called out. "We're headin' in."

The pegasus was in a good mood. He was flying again. Velvet was going to be okay. And he'd even gotten to chat with a caravan merchant and barter (or, more precisely, watch Velvet Remedy barter). I had been surprised how many little items he had managed to scavenge from Old Olneigh while the rest of us were focused on just moving through.

I wasn't the only one with a vice.

"Incomin' griffins," Calamity called out. I brought up my E.F.S. and verified that they were friendly. A moment later, Blackwing and her Talons flew into view, circling and pulling up along side us.

"Littlepip and friends," she said. I felt my cheeks redden. Why was it never *Calamity and friends* or *Velvet Remedy and friends* I wondered for what seemed like the millionth-billionth time. Of course, by now I knew the answer. I had Homage and my companions to thank for it. Yay.

"Blackwing!" I said, brushing off my embarrassment to talk to the griffin. "I was hoping to see you. I have something I need to ask you for, and I hoped we could come to an arrangement."

"Oh?" The griffin merc raised an eyebrow. "This should be good…"

* * *

…I woke up, finding myself staring at the familiar ceiling of Doctor Helpinghoof's clinic. Only this time, at least, I wasn't bound.

I knew better than to get up too fast. Instead, I cleared my throat loudly. The voices beyond the partition stopped and a shadow approached. Doctor Helpinghoof pushed aside the partition and eyed me curiously.

"When I said that I could make a tidy profit off of you, I did not mean that as an encouragement."

Velvet Remedy pushed past him, wobbling as she tried to walk with just three legs.

Her eyes were narrowed and her voice was cross. I was completely expecting this.

"I can't believe you!" she nearly shouted. "After everything we've been through! You used them *again!?"*

"I had to," I said evenly. "It was the only way." The only way to make sure Red Eye listened. "But it was just a one-time thing, and I sought treatment immediately." I leveled a gaze at her. "On my own, I could point out."

"One time? Of course. Until the *next time* you decide you need them," Velvet seethed. "Littlepip, haven't you learned *anything!?* You can't do *just one time!"*

I winced. She was right. I was playing with fire even though I knew I was soaked in whiskey. "Please… I know this is bad. But it was really important. I know this will make it harder for me. So I'm going to need you…"

"Let me see!" she demanded. Doctor Helpinghoof had politely backed away.

"See?"

"Your Goddess-damned inventory sorter, Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy barked. "I want to see for myself that you didn't keep any."

A shot of fear went through me. I lifted my PipBuck for her to see, praying that I actually had tossed the damned tin of Party-Time Mint-als into a burning trash barrel the moment I trotted out of the encampment. I prayed that my addiction and the little pony in my head hadn't somehow played tricks with my memory. I was going to be doing too much of that on my own.

"Okay, fine," Velvet said as she looked through my inventory and, thankfully, found no sign of PTMs. "And you better believe I will be going through your things back in the room. And quite regularly from now on."

I nodded. "Thank you, Velvet. I…"

"You've proven you can't be trusted," she snapped, her words wounding me. Even more so because I deserved it.

Doctor Helpinghoof's assistant trotted forward, smiling indulgently. Velvet Remedy looked to the white unicorn buck with the candy-red and scarlet striped mane. "Will it hurt?" Velvet asked, sounding worried. Shooting me a dark look, she added, "Not that she doesn't deserve it a little."

Turning back to the white unicorn, Velvet admitted, "She's been through so much. I don't want her to have to suffer any more."

"Don't worry," the unicorn said. "She won't remember any pain." Turning to me, she asked, "Are you ready to do this?"

I nodded. "Let's get it over with." I slowly pulled myself out of bed and followed him.

As we walked away, I heard Velvet Remedy moan, "You're going to destroy yourself trying to save the entire wasteland, Littlepip…"

* * *

…A piercing white light above me died, and I found myself in darkness, staring up at an unfamiliar ceiling inlaid with strangely patterned mirrors. I was laying back in a chair, a bizarre and uncomfortable position. And I had absolutely no idea how I had gotten here.

The last thing I remembered was being in Helpinghoof's clinic. I seemed to recall that I had been treated for PTM use, and voluntarily at that. I cringed, my mind filling with shame as I remember taking that tin from the nurse's station. I was humiliated and disgusted with myself for the weakness I gave into every time I could have thrown it away. But for the life of me, I couldn't remember actually *taking* one.

Or, for that matter, I didn't remember volunteering for treatment, although I could remember acting as if I had once it was over.

A deep, alien terror started to envelop me as I tried to retrace my actions, only to find my memories of even the flight back to be piecemeal at best. Ever since leaving Maripony, my sense of time had become swiss cheese. But the scattered moments I did remember didn't leave me with the impression that I had been losing time.

A familiar white unicorn buck appeared, leaning over me, his scarlet and candy red mane draping so that it almost touched my face. His mane reminded me of Pinkie Pie's at the party, after it had seemed to deflate. "Don't panic."

"Where am I? How did I get here? Who are you?" The questions tumbled out as fast as I could form them. The unicorn raised a silencing hoof, but I didn't want to be silenced. "What happened to me!?"

I felt another hoof touch my shoulder as Homage stepped around the chair. "Relax, love."

My eyes darted between them, my emotions in turmoil.

"Littlepip," Homage asked, "Do you trust me?"

The answer shot through all my dismay and confusion. "Yes."

Homage whispered, "Then still your thoughts, love. Relax." She helped guide me off the chair into her embrace. I pressed myself against her, breathing hard, trying to find a way to peace in the storm of panic that threatened to overwhelm me.

Her scent became a life preserver tossed into my ocean of distress. And a rope with which to pull myself to safety. Slowly, I relaxed.

"Littlepip, this is Life Bloom," Homage said finally, introducing me formally to the white unicorn with the red and scarlet mane and tail.

"I'm pleased to meet you again," Life Bloom said. "Velvet Remedy and Homage have told me so much about you."

I nodded slowly, piecing a little together. "You are Doctor Helpinghoof's assistant, right? The one that Velvet Remedy has been buying spells from?"

"Indeed I am."

Homage stroked my mane gently as if she could brush out the little shakes I was feeling. "You remember what I told you about the ponies who really run Tenpony Tower? Life Bloom is one of them."

The unicorn buck bowed with a smile. "And you are the Stable Dweller whom DJ Pon3 and Homage have woven into the Bringer of Light."

I flushed with embarrassment, looking away.

"And humble," the buck said with a smile. "That is a good sign."

Turning back to him, I asked again, this time more slowly, "Where am I? And what happened to me?"

The unicorn's horn glowed a brilliant crimson. A small box floated into view. I recognized the kind of box. It was the kind which held memory orbs. "These, Littlepip, are yours."

"Mine?" It took me a breath to grasp what he was saying. "They're *my memories?*"

"Of the last couple days," Homage said in agreement.

I reeled. I'd lost *days?* "Wh…? Why did you remove them?"

"Because you asked me to," Life Bloom said. "And because Homage persuaded me it was for a good cause."

"Life Bloom is a bit of a magical protégé. Takes to new spells like nopony I've ever seen. He's the only unicorn in Tenpony Tower to have mastered the old memory spells once used by the Ministry of Morale," Homage informed me. "He's also the one who can cast the Taint Purge."

Looking at me knowingly, Homage followed that little revelation up with, "So, how are you feeling?"

I stopped. Assessed myself. I felt tired. Strained. The burns on my flank and side had been healed but were still tender.

The deep, unsettling itch was gone.

"There may be minor mutations," Life Bloom announced. "But nothing life-threatening or even, I suspect, life-changing. I'm pretty certain that we purged you in time."

I felt my knees give out as a sudden rush of gratefulness weakened me. "Oh thank you!"

⁂

The box of memory orbs came with a note in my own tooth-writing.

> *Littlepip,*
>
> *The memory orbs inside this box are in order. The first is pretty much a table of contents, and the others are most of my/your memories from the last few days. The three important ones that I think I will want to relive are orbs four, six and eight. Everything else is just long, dull flights and routine stuff. I don't think I/you really need to spend hours trapped in a memory orb just so we can relive our bowel movements or hours of feeling itchy.*
>
> *Don't watch any of these until after you/I get the Black Book and take it to Maripony. Please. I know that's going to be really hard for me/you, but it's important.*
>
> *Yours yourselfly,*
> *Littlepip.*

I read it again and again, but it still made no sense. I looked at the orbs. I wanted my memories back! I wanted to know what I did over the last two days. I needed to know why I had taken Party-Time Mint-als again. What could possibly have been so dire as to make me do that?

A bluish sheath of magic closed the lid, removing the memory orbs from my sight, and floated the box out of my hooves. Homage magically lifted it, placing it into her safe and locking it. The huge painting of Splendid Valley floated back into its place.

She turned towards me, smiling. "Now, how soon do you have to go?"

I shook my head, completely at a loss. I felt untethered. Adrift. I didn't know what my plans were. What I was supposed to be doing next.

All I did know was that Velvet Remedy needed time to recuperate. In reality, so did

Calamity. Maybe all of us did. I hated the idea of spending another day on myself when there were ponies in the Equestrian Wasteland suffering and dying because I wasn't there to help them. But this wasn't time spent for me. This was for my friends. And I couldn't do anything without them. I needed them, now more than ever.

"I think we can take a day or two," I said hesitantly. "But no more than that."

Homage smiled. "Perfect! I'll start dinner."

I remembered something. "Thirty-one!? How could you do that to me!"

"Because I know your body like the beautiful instrument it is!" she called back as she made her way into her kitchen. "And I can coax the most beautiful music from it."

I felt myself go weak. "Not… what… I meant…"

I looked around, wondering suddenly where Xenith was.

* * *

"Hello, me! Welcome to my memories!"

I was looking at myself in a full length mirror. I could see Life Bloom and Homage moving about in the background. The room was dark and strangely shaped with an odd chair in the center beneath a shining spotlight. Mirrored inlays on the ceiling caught the light as it bounced back off the chair, making the lines of mirror seem to glisten.

This is just the table of contents, I told myself. *It's okay to watch just this one.* I felt utterly confused and I needed at least a little context.

"If you are not me, then these memories are not for you," I felt myself say with what was actually my own mouth. This was supremely weird; I was riding me. "Please do not watch any more of them, and return them immediately to DJ Pon3 or his assistant at Tenpony Tower."

That deep itching was gone. I had stood in front of this mirror, saying these things, after Life Bloom had used the Taint Purge spell on me.

"Now, assuming I am me… and this is supremely weird. And I thought writing the note felt bizarre…" I paused, apparently re-gathering my train of thought. Did I usually ramble like this?

"Okay, the first big thing you need to know…" I stopped again. I felt my body deflate with a sigh.

"Dammit, Littlepip!" I said, stomping. "I'm watching this before I told me to, aren't I?"

I felt a rush of embarrassment as I realized I had caught me.

"Celestia rape your cunt with the burning sun if I can't even take simple instruction from *myself!* Do I have no fucking self control?"

I felt myself stomp again. Felt myself huffing. The entire memory was too surreal. "Dammit! Okay… sorry for that if I'm watching this when I should be. If so, I owe myself an apology."

Taking a deep breath, I started again. "I'm going to make this short, just in case I'm the kind of idiot I'm afraid I am." I gave myself a dark look, then continued. "First, by now you've already figured out that there are two kinds of memory spells. The first records a memory, like the spell enchanted into a recollector. The second extracts a memory completely. That's the kind that the Ministry of Morale used when they *weren't being gentle.*"

I felt myself frowning, and the Littlepip in the mirror frowned back.

"Second, I've got a plan for dealing with the Goddess. I've told everypony their parts, and *just* their parts. I'm the only pony who knows all of it. Unfortunately, we can't do anything about the Goddess if we can't even reach Maripony. And if I go in knowing the plan, Trixie can read it right out of my head. Game over. So…" I felt myself lift a foreleg and make a sweeping motion as the Littlepip in the mirror did exactly that.

Crap. I knew I was right. Other me, that is. Arrugh.

"So for the love of Celestia and Luna, for the love of Homage, *don't watch any more of the damn memory orbs until after you take the Black Book to Maripony.*"

I stomped with a huff. "Seriously, I am *so* disappointed in me." Then, sheepishly, I added, "That is, assuming I should be. If I really held out like I told me too, I really have egg on my face right now, don't I?"

I felt utterly guilty and pissed at myself.

"Now, the fourth memory orb is my conversation with Blackwing. I'm sure I'll need to know the deal we struck. The sixth one I'll need to know for entirely different reasons. That's the one where I took a Party-Time Mint-al. I'm beginning to question if that was the right call. But I really, really needed to be at my most persuasive. You'll see.

"The eighth memory orb was being greeted by Homage as we returned to the Tower. And that one I know I'll want to relive again and again."

I gave myself a wink.

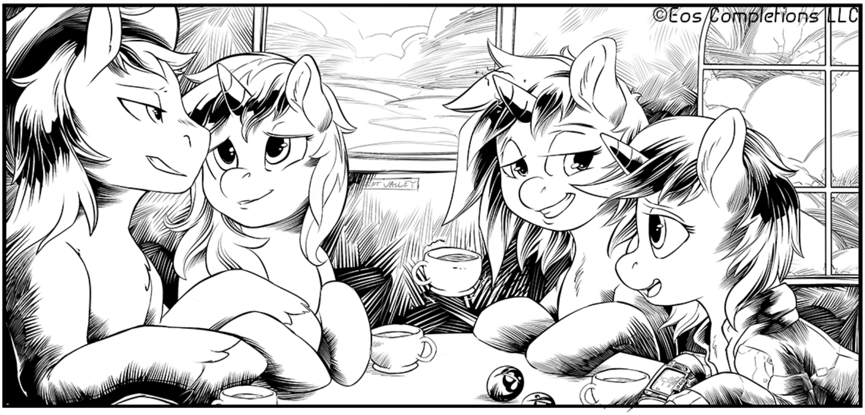
* * *

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: Touched by Taint (1) – Exposure to Taint has altered your physiology. When under the effects of Advanced Radiation Poisoning (400+ Rads) any crippled limbs will automatically regenerate.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Conversations in the Calm Before



"We could form our own secret society."

"Well?"

I had just barely floated the painting of Splendid Valley back into place when Homage came in. "Well what?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound as guilty as I felt.

"Did you sneak around behind my back and break into my safe to look at your memories, even after both I and you told you not to?"

Oh Goddesses. It was bad enough that I disappointed myself. But just how deplorable was it that I broke into Homage's private safe to do so?

I hated my curiosity, and I hated myself for being so weak. I looked to Homage, wondering what to say. Should I admit it? Would it hurt her? Did she already know?

"Littlepip," Homage said with a sad yet stern voice, "I don't know what upsets me more. That you broke into my safe and tried to undo everything you'd worked so hard for, or that you actually considered lying to me about it."

"But I…" My heart broke.

"You paused to think," Homage frowned. "It doesn't take that long to think of how to say yes."

My gaze fell to the floor.

"I think you'd best sleep elsewhere tonight."

I felt my blood freeze. I looked up into Homage's eyes, pleading. The beautiful little grey unicorn gave me a soft, sad smile. "I was there when you made your little speech to yourself. I knew you were probably going to do this… and so did you. I hoped you could be better than that…"

Her words hit me like a buck to the gut.

"…but I'm not angry at you for failing. Just disappointed."

I would rather she be angry. Disappointed hurt so much more. I could handle being yelled at, but the idea that I had failed and saddened Homage…

Homage looked at me tenderly. "Before your worries take you to dark places, I'll tell you up front: this doesn't change my feelings for you at all. And my disappointment will be short lived. I'm not sending you away because I don't want to see you; I'm sending you away because you've been bad and I'm punishing you."

She gave me a little smile, "And I think we both know you need that as much as deserve it." The smile faded. "I'll see you tomorrow, Littlepip."

* * *

It took me most of the ride down the elevator to figure out why I needed punishment as much as I deserved it. There was no question of the latter. The pit in my stomach and the self-loathing in my heart told me that I had done wrong. I had wronged myself. And far worse, I had wronged her. My voice in the darkness.

And with that, even if she forgave, I would never be able to accept forgiveness until she had punished me for it too. I couldn't move on while my tail was twitching. I needed something to fall on my head, or I'd always be looking for it.

I wasn't entirely sure how I'd come up with that analogy ("Awareness! It was under 'E'!"), but I knew that it was appropriate.

I walked slowly down the hall towards the door to our suite, casually unlocking it with my telekinesis. What was once unimaginable had become a feat of such ease I barely focused on it. My mind was largely elsewhere. I was determined to remain at Tenpony Tower for a little while longer, not for myself but for my companions. Each of them had nearly died in the last few days. Xenith and Calamity would both have been turned to ash by the hellhounds' attacks if it had not been for the spell Velvet Remedy learned from Life Bloom last time we were here. Each had suffered fearsome wounds, Velvet's injury still left her in a cast despite the most powerful healing magic and best care the wasteland could provide. Nor was I untouched, but I feared for them more than myself. Deep down, I somehow knew that I was expendable but they were not.

I had a lot of repairing to do. I wondered if I should try to get them counseling. Or should we work through this alone? I wasn't sure where best to begin, or even how much I may have already done. Was I doomed to spend the next days repeating discussions we'd already had but that I didn't remember? Seeing my friends look at me awkwardly as I initiated difficult conversations for a second time?

Couldn't I have at least left myself some notes? Of course, as they say, hindsight is… well, no, even that didn't really apply. My hindsight was perforated. Even worse, I was smart enough to realize that I shouldn't be trying to put the pieces back together. If I thought about things too much, I might be able to reconstruct lines of logic that I didn't want to have in the forefront of my brain when I next confronted the Goddess. I suspected that Trixie's telepathy didn't extend much beyond reading my surface thoughts – if it had, I think things would have gone a lot differently in Maripony. (Or perhaps she could, but it just required a level of focus the Goddess couldn't commit to while maintaining connection to all her alicorns. The fact that Calamity had been able to surprise her about something he had been looking at told me she wasn't nearly as on top of current thoughts as she wanted us to believe.) Still, if I knew the plan or even suspected what I was up to, there was no way I could avoid thinking about it while I enacted it.

These thoughts so preoccupied my head that I did not even notice the sounds as I entered the room. But the sight stopped me dead.

Calamity. And Velvet Remedy.

Together. In bed. Intertwined. Moving…

…doing…

I shouldn't be here. Leavingnowbye!

I had become rather exceptional at stealth. I was able to slip out fast and smooth, without making the slightest peep, without being seen.

The click as I closed the door behind me sounded louder than Little Macintosh.

I froze. My whole body was tense, my nerves covered in ice. My mind was reeling. I couldn't begin to formulate feelings of my own about what I had just walked in on; I was still panicking.

On the other side of the door, I heard voices. My heart was pounding.

"Did… somepony just open the door?" she asked cautiously.

"Ah locked it," he responded.

And then, in almost perfect unison:

"Li'lpip!"

"Littlepip!"

I ran. As fast and as silently as I could. As I raced down the hall, I could swear I heard Xenith's voice float out of nowhere, proclaiming: "Dooooooomed."

⁂

I clopped my hoof on the door to Twilight's Athenaeum. Part of me knew I was supposed to be banished from Homage's company for the day, but I wasn't looking to get away with anything, just to get away. I needed a place to hide, and a place to stay the night, and Homage came to the forefront of my thoughts.

Nopony answered. The door was locked, and I wasn't about to unlock another anything without permission. I dashed up the stairs to the balcony and lifted my hoof towards the door to the emergency broadcast station. Was she busy? Would the beat of my hoof interrupt a recording? Did I have the right to take that risk?

And what would she have to say to me? How could I ask her to make an exception for me because I had managed invade the privacy of even more of my friends?

Doomed indeed. And I deserved it. I put down my hoof. I'd just spend the day wandering aimlessly around Tenpony Tower, avoiding everypony, and waiting until the final hour of my exile was over.

Not a problem. I could go half a day without getting myself in trouble.

I heard a chime in the atrium below. The elevator doors slid open. I crouched flat on the balcony as I saw Velvet Remedy and Calamity step out into the atrium, Calamity helping support Velvet with one of his wings. Oh Goddesses! I couldn't face them right now. I backed up against the M.A.S.E.B.S. door, hiding.

"Ya think she's upset?" Calamity's voice sounded below.

I could hear the odd thump of Velvet's foreleg cast as she moved awkwardly into the atrium.

"Well, I wish that she'd just see this as an opportunity to get back at me for some of my teasing," Velvet Remedy's voice floated up to me. Her chocolaty-smooth voice had a slightly harried timbre. "But I doubt that she will. The poor girl had a crush on me for ages, and while I've been under the impression that she is over it, I worry she might still feel hurt."

Did I? I wasn't sure. I was still too wrapped up in the fear of being caught. And now, I worried that I might feel like that. It would be unfair. And selfish. I had a relationship with Homage that left me… exhausted, to be honest. What right did I have to begrudge anyone else a relationship of their own? Especially my two closest friends. I should be happier than ever for them.

"Ah honestly don' think ya give Li'lpip enough credit. She's got too much heart t' let jealousy eat away at her. Or us. Ah reckon Ah got more t' worry 'bout in that regard from yer bird."

It dawned on me that I *wasn't* feeling happy for them. I didn't think I felt jealous. I wanted to be a much better pony that that. If I was jealous, I didn't deserve the friendship of either of them. But no, I didn't think it was jealousy either that I was feeling.

It was concern. An achingly pessimistic worry.

Calamity's voice rose up from below again. "Do ya think she's here? Seems awfully…"

"Quiet? Yes, now that you mention it. If she was in Homage's company, I would expect we'd be able to hear her. At least, that is what Xenith would have me believe."

I buried my face in my forehooves, suddenly blushing. There was absolutely no way this could get more awkward and humiliating.

"I mean… thirty-one? Celestia's mercy!"

Okay, I was wrong. *Now* it couldn't get worse.

"That's… a lot, right?" Calamity asked in buckish ignorance.

"Yes, that's a lot," Remedy said. I could almost hear the rolling of her eyes.

"Did… you…?" Oh no. Did Calamity really ask that? I heard the soft smack of Velvet Remedy's hoof. Good for her.

"You do not ask a lady that, Calamity!" she scolded. Then, in a smaller voice, she admitted, "Yes. Twice."

"Twice?" Oh the big idiot. "And we were… then she was…" I felt my ears burning as I realized my pegasus friend was trying to do the math. "How the hell did she 'av time t' come t' Splendid Valley?"

"Indeed," Velvet said with a slight trace of bitterness. "Clearly, Homage's cutie mark should be Littlepip. Obviously, that's what she's best at *doing.*"

I wanted to melt into the wall and disappear into some void beyond. I wanted the moon itself to come crashing down through the ceiling and crush me. I didn't want them to find me, and I didn't want to be hearing this private conversation… and the mere thought that they might discover I had been unintentionally eavesdropping made me die inside.

I heard a splash. One of them had stepped into the fountain's pool.

"After Maripony, I finally understand the alicorn in this room," Velvet's voice mused, changing the subject. "I had been wondering how and why Twilight Sparkle would have chosen such a decoration."

"When we do find 'er," Calamity stated slowly, "Ah think ya oughta do the talkin'."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Well… y'all are just better at it than me. Li'lpip will want t' know 'bout… what we are now, an' all. Ah'd jus' mess it up."

"And just what are we now?" Velvet said silkily.

"Dammit," Calamity sighed in frustration and confusion. "Tha's jus' the question Ah was tryin' t' avoid." Slowly, he admitted, "Ah don' know."

Velvet's voice was gentle and kind. "You're Calamity, and I'm Velvet Remedy. Just like we were before, only more intimate." I heard another splash. "I'm not going to push for us to be anything more than you want us to be. I'm never going to tie you down, or demand a commitment that you aren't looking for…"

I couldn't help but feel this conversation was built upon a great many that I hadn't been privy to before, and that I had no excuse to be listening to this one. My mind began to scramble for ways to escape.

"Ya don't even need t' ask, girl."

"I know," Velvet purred. "But I need you to know that I'm not looking to change anything about you… well, except maybe for your grammar… I just want to be with you."

If I opened the door behind me, closed it and stood up quickly, surely they would think I had just stepped out of the station behind me? It seemed like a good plan.

The door was locked. Of course it was.

Well, surely I couldn't get myself into any more trouble…

"Aw dangit. Ah don't know nothin' what t' say. Ah ain't any good at this sorta thing."

"You don't know anything to say," Velvet tried pointlessly.

"Ayep. Wish Ah did. Maybe Ah… should jus' hold ya?"

The lock clicked. I slid the door open, then stood as I closed it again.

"Littlepip."

"Li'lpip."

I looked down at them, both standing in the fountain's pool, Calamity's forehoof sliding away from an interrupted embrace. My heart raced, and I blurted out the first thing I thought of. "Oh. Hello. I was just in there with Homage in the place doing the thing."

They were giving me odd looks. I wanted to facehoof myself into unconsciousness. Instead, I gave them a forced and probably awkward smile. They looked at each other, then back to me, their expressions melting into ones of compassion and concern. I realized that my awkwardness would be taken as discomfort over what they knew I had seen and not what they didn't know I had heard. Velvet Remedy started to call up to me…

The door behind me opened and Homage peeked out. "Littlepip, did you just try to come in?" Her eyes narrowed at me. "That's not how punishment works."

Calamity and Velvet Remedy exchanged looks of quick realization.

Doomed. I am not a clever pony.

* * *

After twenty minutes of explaining and confessing and apologizing (with a hint of blubbering), I found myself sitting across from Velvet and Calamity at Homage's table, feeling small and guilty, as Homage made everyone tea.

At last, however, I had been able to put solid thoughts to my feelings. The problem now was how or even if I should voice them. What if my worries were correct? What damage would I do by shining a light on them. Or worse, what if I was wrong, but my questions led to doubts in their own minds?

The silence stretched awkwardly between the three of us. Velvet looked patient but strained. Calamity fidgeted.

If I said anything, it would have to be now, while they were together and could draw support from each other as they answered. But what if…?

Calamity rubbed a hoof on the table, absently asking Velvet, "Hey, ya figure they did it on here?"

I changed the subject quickly, and not just because the answer was yes, and I didn't want them thinking about that when Homage put tea and a plate of cakes on the table. "I guess I'm just concerned. I mean, you two are my closest friends. We travel everywhere together. And with hardly anypony else…"

"And you're worried we've grown intimate out of convenience?" Velvet Remedy finished for me tactfully.

"uh… pretty much, yeah."

Calamity snorted. "Now Ah know how y'all might think that way, comin' from a Stable. But Ah've been down here for awhile now. Ah've had plenty o' other options. Jus' never cared for 'em." He nodded upwards. "Had options up there too. But none o' the mares in the service shared muh feelin's 'bout helpin' the ponyfolk down here. A right turnoff, if'n y'ask me."

I had to admit, I'd never even considered the idea of Calamity having relationships available to him with anypony other than us. He just seemed like such a lone defender that I thought of him as being just as much a stranger to the rest of the world as we were. But hadn't Railright claimed that Calamity had been offered a home and place in New Appleloosa?

Homage came in with the tea and cakes. She smiled and gave me a little kiss on my horn, which suddenly felt pleasantly warm, as she floated a cup of tea onto the table in front of me.

"I'll admit," Velvet Remedy began, "that I was worried about the same thing at first. The first thing that attracted me to Calamity was his *wings.*"

"Ah swear, y'all got a feather fetish," Calamity nipped playfully.

Velvet giggled primly. "No. I had just abandoned my home and risked whatever I would find out here for freedom, and there you were. More free than I ever imagined any pony could be. Not even the ground could hold you."

"Aah shucks, Ah ain't no differ'nt than any other pegasi."

"Oh, but you are," Velvet cooed maturely. "I didn't know it at the time, but you are so much more. I always wanted to be a medical pony, and I embraced the first chance I got to. But I left my home behind for selfish reasons. You cut your shackles because they were preventing you from helping other ponies. You freed yourself out of compassion and kinship."

Calamity was blushing now. I realized I liked seeing him like that. It brought out a beauty in him.

"You truly care about ponies," she continued, her eyes roaming over Calamity. "And I've seen how you are with us, especially with Littlepip," she said, turning back to me. "He'll stand by you, never leave you. Protect you even from yourself…"

"Always there to catch me," I found myself saying softly.

Velvet Remedy smiled and nodded. "I feel safe with him around because I know he will protect us. Especially you, since you seem to need it the most. But he has always been right there for me when I needed him too."

I was suddenly feeling guilty again, this time for monopolizing Calamity's time. I lowered my head, breathing in the calming scent of the zebra chai tea wafting up from my cup.

Scowling a little, Velvet Remedy couldn't help but add, "I'm not saying we're a match made in the clouds. He does tend to jump to violence as a solution far too readily for my tastes… and he's not the only one." She fixed me with a look. For a few moments, her gaze held me like steel, making me squirm. Then her expression relaxed. "But I realize that, in the Equestrian Wasteland, violence is often the most appropriate response. Although not as often as you two take to it. And at least both of you are motivated to shed the blood you do out of justice, compassion and a sense of responsibility for your fellow pony. All of which seem sorely lacking in far too many ponies out here."

She turned to Calamity with a look that clearly said "your turn".

Homage trotted around and sat behind me, watching unobtrusively. I felt a gentle support radiating off of her despite her recent disappointment. I was supposed to be being punished, but there was no hint of that.

I found myself fervently wishing at Calamity to not blow it. I wasn't happy for them because I was worried they were going to get hurt. But I wanted them to be together, I realized. I hoped for them. And Velvet's words were like a ray of real, untainted sunshine. For the first time, I really thought maybe they could last together. So long as Calamity didn't say anything stupid in the next few minutes, that was.

Calamity shuffled, looking uncomfortable. "Ah take it Ah can't jus' say 'ditto'?"

I took a long sip from my cup, the slightly bitter liquid washing over my tongue. I felt the warmth of the tea spread soothingly through me.

Velvet Remedy gave Calamity a shake of her head. The pegasus reached back to brush at his mane, accidentally tipping his desperado hat into his eyes.

"Well… she's beautiful," he started. "Not jus' outside. Behind her outer beauty an' occasionally abrasive personality, she's really beautiful inside."

I winced. He was going to be paying for that for a bit.

"Ah mean…" From Calamity's shuffle, I guessed he knew it too. But he was being honest. I hoped Velvet took that into account. "Look, when we first rescued her, Ah didn't know what t' think. She was helpin' slavers. An' she was… well… Ah was expectin' her t' be fancy an' prissy an' high falootin' like the folks in this Tower here. But she weren't like that at all. She's beautiful, but she's… I dunno… down t' earth?"

He paused, looking for a word, then smiled as he settled on, "Practical. She's practical.

An' more importantly, she's devoted. She weren't helpin' slavers cuz she sympathizes for any o' what they were doin', but because she's dedicated t' helpin' folk. And she don't let unpleasantness or discomfort get in the way."

Calamity wrapped his tail around Velvet Remedy, who was holding him with rapt attention. "She's faithful. She's stuck by our side even as we walked inta hell. Her wantin' t' play diplomatic-like wi' aggressive or evil types does wear thin, but Ah reckon maybe there's somethin' t' it sometimes… an' she does that cuz she really does care about folk and is committed t' helpin' them. Even if a mess o' them don't deserve it. Ain't like her t' ask if they do."

He shrugged. "How could Ah not absolutely love 'er for that?"

Looking into Velvet's eyes, Calamity finished by saying, "It's like… yer jus' what the doctor ordered, y'know?" Velvet rolled her eyes at the corniness, but smiled. "The Equestrian Wasteland ain't a pretty place. It's rough an' it's grim an' it's bloody. An' some days it c'n be hard t' remember whats worth fightin' for out here. But Ah don't have t' look any further than at this here charcoal unicorn mare next t' me t' be reminded jus' how good ponies c'n be, and jus' how worth it all the struggle is."

Part of me wanted to jump up and hug them. Part of me wanted to tell them to get a room… but then, I was kinda to blame for them not being there.

"Okay… I'm convinced," I said with a smile. Homage wrapped her forelegs around me from behind. Our couple-ness made me feel less awkward in front of theirs.

"Yes," Velvet Remedy said suddenly to Calamity while giving the cakes a declining look. "I think they did things on this table."

Homage bit one of my suddenly-burning ears playfully. Far too late, I changed the subject, "So… how long have you two been… together?"

Calamity laughed. "Y'mean physically? Since, what?" He looked at Velvet, who was trying to keep a lady-like distance from the question. "Yesterday?"

I blinked.

"Aw come on, Li'lpip. We didn't even kiss b'fore last week."

Velvet Remedy sighed, then said smoothly, "Really, Littlepip, we have you to thank that we have a relationship at all."

Wait, what?

"Ayep. Iffin it weren't fer ya actin' like we was already a couple back at that Stable, Ah don't think we woulda started lookin' at each other that way."

I blushed so hard I should have caught on fire.

* * *

Calamity rolled two memory orbs across the table to me. "Ya said it was okay t' see these again."

I caught them in a telekinetic blanket, careful not to focus directly on either of them. "Are they… mine?"

"Naw. Traded for 'em. The caravan pony claimed they were gen-u-ine memories o' Rainbow Dash." He gave me a wry smirk as my heart gave a little leap. I was actually thrilled to learn anything more I could about those ponies. When had it become such a passion?

"Are they?" I asked hopefully.

"From whatcha said last time," Calamity responded with a voice suggesting he felt snookered, "not 'xactly."

I floated them into my saddlebags for safe keeping and finished my tea. It was now barely lukewarm. The conversation had lasted a while.

After Velvet and Calamity had taken their leave, I felt Homage's forelegs slip away from me. The cups, saucers and plate of cakes lit up with the glow of Homage's horn and began to float themselves back to the kitchen sink.

I felt like a warm blanket had been pulled from me on a chilly winter night. "I… guess I should go now. I'm still being punished, right?" I got up and began moving, but not in any particular direction.

"Yes," Homage said a touch reluctantly.

I wished punishment didn't mean having to be apart from her. The thought of being alone tonight hurt more now than it did before. I stopped next to a desk littered with Homage's personal things. She had a triptych of pictures framed on the desk. Pictures of me in the wasteland, my friends nearby. The pictures were taken from someplace high above and far away, zoomed in until I nearly filled the frame, but washed out with the odd tint of all the air between the camera and its subject. I suspected that the pictures were taken by the cameras on those spires. And I suspected the willing separation tonight hurt Homage as much as me. "Couldn't you just spank me instead or something?" I asked, hoping for a faster punishment.

Homage laughed. "Nooo. But tomorrow night, I might. As a reward."

I looked at her in confusion, one ear dipping. How would a spanking be a reward? oh… OH! Ohmygosh! I lost balance, my head crashing to the desktop. I backed up, stumbling, seeing stars.

Homage was chuckling even as she trotted up to make sure I was okay. "I think I better go now," I told her. "Before I hurt myself. Again."

* * *

I ambled through the market sector of Tenpony Tower, paying little attention to the ponies around me. The smells from the restaurants and snack shops teased my nostrils with promises that were probably too wonderful for the centuries-old packaged foods to deliver. But I let my nose drag me towards one of them anyway.

Looking at the wall-mounted menu, my eyes widened at the prices, each of which was now written in pencil with the tell-tale signs of several previous erasings. I lifted my PipBuck, checking how many caps I had on hoof. Velvet Remedy was the queen of barter, and so we'd been letting her keep most of our caps. I barely had enough for a Sparkle~Cola or a box of stuffed apple cakes. (Filled with a sweet, candy-apple filling and five thousand times the daily recommended amount of preservatives. Yay.)

I plopped down my bottle caps and ordered the cola. I watched as a pony slid the caps off the counter with a hoof, then picked up a crowbar in his mouth and trotted back to a still-functional Sparkle~Cola machine, prying it open and fetching my drink. A chain and padlock on the ground told me how they kept their supply secure at night.

I took my cola, floating it to my muzzle and tasting the lukewarm, deliciously carroty flatness. I was an hour into my exile and already hating it.

I spotted Calamity leaving the constabulary, looking disgruntled.

"Highway robbery," he groused. "Anywhere else, Ah could buy an armor-piercin' round fer what they're askin' fer a rubber one." He added, "Well, if anywhere else sold 'em."

I scampered over to trot at his side. "How's your wing?"

Calamity smiled, judging my intentions. "Velvet an' Ah are both doin' fine. Well… not fine. She's hurtin' inside. What happened t' both o' us in Ol' Olneigh scares 'er badly. But we're workin' through it t'gether. So don't go tryin' t' set us all up wi' a shrink again."

I blinked. "I did that?" I had considered it earlier.

"Ayep. Not one o' yer better plans," Calamity noted. "But well intentioned."

I wasn't sure I wanted to see that memory. Ever.

We walked in silence a while. I drank from my cola, then offered some to my friend. Calamity accepted, biting down on the bottle's rim and tilting it back for a swig. Then he passed it back. We walked on in silence some more.

"Ah'm worried, Li'lpip."

I nodded. There were about a hundred things for us to be worried about. Plus several extra ones for Calamity as he plunged into this newly deeper relationship with Velvet Remedy.

"The Enclave… that experiment in Ol' Olneigh. That was new. Post-Calamity new. Ah don't know why they would be there, why they would be doin' that, or what they all are up to," he looked at me. "An' Ah'm worried."

Of all the possible worries he might have, this was the one I expected the least. But I knew that I shouldn't have. These were his ponyfolk. His old home. They had to be weighing on him as much as concerns for Stable Two weighed on me.

"The pegasi are good ponyfolk," Calamity said. "Whatever happens, remember that. Cuz the Enclave… they ain't. Not so much."

* * *

* * *

I was in a large foyer marbled in grey. Large vertical windows let in the grey light of a rainy day. Outside, a dozen ponies were protesting, chanting and waving signs in the rain. Inside, ponies trotted about on personal business, or stood conversing in clumps. Many wore long raincoats still slick with a wet sheen. A few were hauling small wagons filled with boxes.

My host was an earth pony mare sitting behind a long counter, gazing languidly at the text on a terminal. From the stirring warmth in certain parts of her body, the story she was fixated on was of a cloppy nature and probably not safe for work.

A familiar voice echoed from somewhere above and safely distant enough that my host was able to change the screen (to a memo on Wartime Stress Disorder) without rushing suspiciously. She looked back and up, her eyes moving to a spiraling set of wrought-iron stairs that descended from a mezzanine level above. The whole lobby gave me the impression of Ministry architecture.

A flash of light erupted about four yards from my host's counter, wrenching her attention away from the stairwell before she could spot who she was looking for. Rarity stood in the lobby, wobbling slightly. Her dress, mane and the large satchel on her side all hissed up wisps of smoke. She blinked, wide-eyed, seeming disoriented. But in an eye-blink, she had gathered herself together and was trotting up to my host with an urgent expression.

"Hello. Welcome to…" my host began politely. But Rarity was in too much of a hurry for niceties.

"Yes, yes. I know where I am, and I know who you are," she said, waving a hoof. "I need to know if Rainbow Dash is still here. Please tell me I haven't missed her."

Before my host could answer, that familiar voice answered for her. Hovering about halfway down the spiral staircase, Rainbow Dash exclaimed loudly, "Whoa! Rarity, did you just *teleport* here?"

Standing on the steps behind Rainbow Dash, Applejack was looking equally impressed. Her orange coat and blonde mane made for a welcome splash of warm colors in the stark, cool room.

Rarity paused, seeing the two of them, then smiled with a soft whinny. "Yes, well, I *have* been trading spells with Twilight for years now… and let me tell you, it is *not* as easy as she makes it look." With a wince, she added, "How's my mane?"

Rainbow Dash swooped down to greet her. "It's fine." Descending the stairs, Applejack added, "It's gorgeous." It looked like she'd run a few laps around a burning house.

"So what's up?" Rainbow Dash asked cheerfully.

Rarity glanced behind her and up towards Applejack, a brief look of unease passing over her face, and then turned to Rainbow Dash. "I had some… things to talk to you about. But it can wait. Until you're alone."

Rainbow Dash blinked. Then her eyes opened wide. She whispered, "Oh… about the new…" then glanced back towards Applejack too. "…armor?"

Rarity nodded. "That and the other thing. I've been having a lot of trouble trying to perfect that spell, and I wanted to see the device you want it embedded into."

"Oh!" Rainbow Dash reached back and scratched at her rainbow mane with a forehoof. "Well, Apple Bloom's all set to procure a life support capsule from the Ministry of Peace. We should have it by next week, but… well, she's going to be modifying it a lot. Do you need to wait until it's finished?"

Rarity raised an eyebrow. "Apple Bloom's part of this too?"

"Yeah. Why… is that a problem?"

"Well," Rarity said, brushing her left forehoof in circles against the marble floor. "I really don't want my little sister anywhere near this research of mine. And she and Apple Bloom are best of friends…"

"Did Ah hear muh little sister's name?" Applejack said, trotting up from the bottom of the stairs.

Rainbow Dash turned and smiled. "Yeah. She's helping me on a project."

"Ah thought the Ministry of Awesome didn't actually do anything?"

Dash snorted and puffed herself up, "They don't do anything that *isn't awesome,* you mean."

Rarity and Applejack exchanged looks of doubt.

"Anyway," Rarity said a little too hastily. "I really should be going…"

"Wait," Applejack said. "Y'mean ya teleported all the way over here jus' t' go?" She frowned. "How come Ah get the feelin' Ah'm undesired company?"

"Unwanted?" Rarity gasped. "Oh heavens no! If anything, I want *more* Applejack." I snickered inwardly and was glad my eavesdropping host didn't do the same. "We don't see *nearly* enough of each other anymore. It feels like it's been ages since…" She paused, then chimed up, *"I-deee-ah!* We're together right now. Let's do lunch."

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

Applejack chimed in, "Well, Ah've got 'bout an hour b'fore Ah gotta be at a meeting fer alla the governors of the Ministry o' Technology. And there is a new apple fritter place that Caramel Apple's kids 'ave just opened up which Ah've been meanin' t' try…"

"Sounds perfect." Rarity clapped her forehooves with a demure squee. "Wait… aren't those the same brutes who tried to kill you with an elevator?"

Applejack's eyes narrowed. "That ain't never been proven."

"Still, the idea of you spending time in a room with that lot…"

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash jumped in. "Want me to come with you? If they're planning anything funny, I'll make them think twice."

"Ah c'n handle muhself ju' fine, Dash. But Ah do thank y'all kindly for the offer." Seeing her two friends still frowning, unconvinced, she sighed and added, "Besides, Sergeant SteelHooves has already offered t' be muh personal escort."

"Have I met this guy?" Rainbow Dash asked suspiciously. "Are you sure you can trust him?"

Applejack sighed. "Ah don't think ya have, but he served wi' muh brother. He trusted him, an' so do Ah." A smirk scrawled across her muzzle. "'Sides, Ah don't plan on bein' there too long. Just 'nuf t' give muh speech. Ah've been practicin' it all day. Wanna hear it?"

Rarity's eyes widened at the thought of listening through an entire speech by Applejack, or perhaps just alarmed at having to do so in a public lobby while her mane was frizzy. "Maybe… over lunch?" she suggested.

"Sure," Rainbow Dash encouraged Applejack with considerably more volume. "Let's hear it."

"Okay…" Applejack paused. Stood straight and tall. Cleared her throat. Closed her eyes.

"Y'all are *fired.*"

Rarity and Rainbow Dash stared. Applejack opened one eye and blushed. "Well, how was it?"

"That's… it?"

"Ayep." She blushed some more, looking a bit proud of herself and yet a touch worried.

"Awesome! You tell them, AJ!" Rainbow Dash grinned wildly as Rarity stomped on the floor with applause. "Dang, now I want to go just to see their faces."

"Hey, Rainbow Dash!" a voice called out from the doorway, causing her head to whip around. Three elderly pegasi trotted into the lobby. One of them, a light grey buck with a short-cropped age-greyed mane that fell over his eyes, hadn't been wearing a rain slicker and shook himself, spraying water everywhere to the shouts and grumbles of the ponies in the lobby around him.

"Hello! Welcome…" my host began to say, but her words trailed off as the three pegasus pushed their way up to Rainbow Dash, ignoring everypony else including her friends.

"Hey, Rainbow, remember me?" a mustard-colored buck asked, stepping forward in front of the others. He was an unusually large buck, his rainslicker covering only half of his flank, revealing most of a large orange basketball for a cutie mark. I wondered idly if he had one ball or two… then immediately wanted to jab my hoof in my eye to kill the mental image that followed.

Rainbow looked them over then narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "Sorry. No. I'm rather busy and only have time to remember important ponies."

The three all scowled. The mustard one growled, shoving a hoof into Rainbow's breast. "Well then, maybe you remember my little brother. He was one of the pegasi you got killed fighting that dragon over Hoofington."

Rainbow Dash's eyes went wide. Her demeanor changed immediately. "Oh… I'm so sorry. Several brave ponies died valiantly that day…"

"Yeah," said the third, a pegasus the color of dark dust with piercing blue eyes and a few remaining strands of a sandy mane on his bald-coated head. "Seems like an awful lot of pegasi die valiantly these days. In fact, seems like we do the bulk of the dying. I don't know anypony in Cloudsdayle who ain't lost family."

Rainbow Dash nodded sadly. "The war…"

"The war," the dark-dust pony scoffed. "The war is on the ground. Against zebras…"

"And dragons," Rainbow Dash reminded him. "They're using dragons now, in case you somehow forgot. Not to mention griffin mercs."

"And some of them have magic fetishes that can allow them to fly," Rarity chimed in knowingly. "If you think it's impossible for an earth-bound mare to fly her way into Cloudsdayle with the right magic, you have tragically short memories."

The mustard-colored one spat, "Well, they wouldn't be bringing in dragons if the pegasi had just stayed out of the war. Now I hear you're pushing Luna's new initiative to put even more pegasi on the front lines? You won't be satisfied until every one of us is facing down zebra guns."

"If the… had just…" Rainbow Dash sputtered. "What!?"

"And we ain't the only ones who think that neither," the balding one informed Rainbow Dash coldly. "And while we might not be important, my sister is the mayor of Clousdayle, and she…"

"Now jus' one apple-buckin' minute," Applejack interrupted loudly. "Now Ah know y'all have lost kin, an' Ah know how much that hurts." She strode up to the mustard-colored buck. "Ah lost muh own brother in this war. His name was Big Macintosh. Y'all may 'ave heard o' him!"

The mustard-colored pony had the dignity to look abashed.

I heard a click and a whirr from above. My host turned away from the argument as the text on her screen disappeared, replaced by a flashing warning.

>>LIVE GRENADE DETECTED<<

At seemingly the same instant, Rarity gasped. "Grenade!"

Ponies began to scatter, running into each other, not knowing where to go.

Rarity's magic flared around her satchel, opening it.

Beams of colored light shot out from the twin magical energy turrets which had descended from the ceiling. They struck a pony in the crowd, turning her into a burning pink silhouette of whomever she had been.

My host looked down, scanning the floor, her actions seeming unbearably slow. I mentally shouted for her to duck for cover, but she seemed transfixed. Her eyes fell on the metal apple not two yards from her desk. The dark bulk of a large, open book fell down over it, and four white hooves jumped on top.

The Book!

In an instant:

A flash of fire and swirling magical energy underneath the book,

A cracking sound that left a buzzing silence in its wake,

A rippling of explosive force that threw Rarity back.

My host stumbled, disoriented, a ringing in her ears. Everypony was shouting, but their voices seemed muffled and far away.

I spotted The Black Book. It had landed next to Rarity, smoking but undamaged.

I felt conflicting waves of horror and relief. How could any book survive smothering a magical energy grenade? What kind of book was this? And yet… thank the stars that it wasn't hurt. That book was dangerous, but it was valuable! Just looking at it, I knew how useful it must be…

Rainbow Dash was fast. She flew up to my host, breaking her out of her fear-induced paralysis with a clop of her forehooves. "Lock this place down!" she shouted over the ringing in my ears. "Gather the witnesses and call the Ministry of Morale. Somepony saw something, even if they don't know it."

Applejack was trotting around, calling out, "Is everypony okay? Anypony hurt?" She turned to my host and lifted a hoof as she shouted, her voice sounding like it was coming to me through yards of thick cotton, but at least the buzzing was quickly fading. "Call up the Ministry of Peace. Have 'em send counselors." My host nodded.

Rarity groaned, getting shakily to her hooves and rubbing her ears. "Quick thinkin', Rarity," Applejack said, dashing over to help her up. "Ah reckon ya just saved a mess o' lives with…"

Applejack froze, staring at The Black Book. "Is that… what Ah think it is?"

Turning to Rarity, a dark scowl crossing her face, Applejack said, "Ya said ya were gonna get rid o' that cursed thing!"

Dusting herself off, Rarity stared back. "I said I would burn It," Rarity said calmly. "And I tried. But as you can see, It doesn't burn." Lowering her voice, she whispered something to Applejack that made the earth pony's ears shoot up in alarm. Then, raising her voice again, she added, "I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia."

I winced. Even my host winced, realizing that couldn't have led to pleasant conversations.

Applejack frowned, clearly wanting to believe her friend, but having doubts all the same. Rarity's guilty look wasn't helping. "Well… ya still shoulda gotten rid o' it!"

"How?" Rarity retorted stubbornly. "I doubt anything short of a megaspell could destroy It. And I certainly don't want to dispose of The Book where It could find Its way into the wrong hooves."

"Dammit!" Rainbow Dash piped up, unknowingly interrupting her friends before their fierce discussion could grow into an argument. Dash had flown over to the pile of ash which had once been a pony. "Whose idea was it to use magical energy defenses in here? A pile of ash isn't going to conveniently tell you who it was or offer up its former possessions for an investigation."

"Zebra sympathizers, I would suspect," intoned Rarity dourly, turning towards the very upset blue-coated pegasus.

"Shouldn't jump t' that conclusion, Rarity," Applejack warned. "Ah don't like this blamin' zebras fer everything that goes wrong."

"It certainly wouldn't be the first time they've taken a shot at me," Rarity bristled. She looked at Applejack with surprise. "After Zecora's betrayal, I'm surprised you still defend them."

"Jus' cuz Zecora turned out t' be a bad apple don't mean alla them are," Applejack insisted.

Even though my host was paying more attention to the earth pony and the unicorn, I was able to catch a brief guilty look cross Rainbow Dash's face. I realized suddenly that Rarity and Applejack didn't know the truth about their zebra friend. The reality behind Zecora's defection was a carefully guarded secret held by only two Mares and probably only the tiniest fraction of ponies within their respective Ministries.

"Ain't like there ain't other ponyfolk who might want t' take a shot at one o' us."

Rarity met Applejack's statement with wide eyes. "Oh dear… You're right."

"Well, if it was them who was behind it, they sure as sugar ain't stopped me from gettin' t' that meetin'."

"Hell," Rainbow Dash blurted out, flying up. "For all we know, the target may have been that lot." She pointed a hindhoof towards the three pegasi cowering in a corner. "What they were speakin' amounts pretty much t' sedition." Her expression was cross and grim. "I'm beginning to think Cloudsdayle needs a Ministry of Morale hub."

Rarity looked around desperately. "Oh dear, oh dear. Lunch is off, I'm afraid. I need to get back to Image. We don't have much time to figure out what to tell the newsponies to say about this. Three Ministry Mares… oh, this is bad. We have to move on this now."

As Rarity magically scooped up the Black Book and vanished in another flash, my host finally began actually doing her job.

* * *

When I returned from the memory orb, I was no longer on the secluded bench outside some restrooms where I had laid down to view it. I was someplace else. Dark and cold.

The Black Book floated in the darkness before me. Just an afterimage that was already fading.

A spotlight flared to life above me, its beam pinning me to the ornate purple and pink marbled floor as it destroyed any adjustments my eyes were making to the dark. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, detecting at least half a dozen figures in the shadows around me. According to my E.F.S. compass, they were not hostile. That only relaxed me slightly, considering I had apparently been abducted.

"Hello?" I asked, not trying to keep the annoyance from my voice. "Who are you? And what do you want?"

I immediately suspected they wanted me to do something. Some task to perform, some new distraction that would further divert me from my date with the Canterlot Ruins. If so, they were in for disappointment. I chose when and if I strayed off task, and I'd done too much of that already. There was a clock ticking. There was a bomb poised to destroy this very tower and everypony in it. And I didn't have time for games.

A pony trotted forward, concealed in a full robe. Under his hood, his face was cast into black shadow by the light from above. But the folds of the hood made it clear that he was a unicorn. And enough light bounced up from the marbled floor to recognize a mottled brown coat.

"Greetings, Littlepip," said a familiar voice that I couldn't quite place. The voice had the tones of a refined gentlestallion but shied away from sounding too haughty. "We apologize for the rude awakening."

"We who?" I asked, but I already knew.

"We call ourselves the Twilight Society," the gentlestallion proclaimed. I forced myself not to ask if he was kidding.

"Very enigmatic. And who are you really?" I said, biting back deeper sarcasm. "And what do you want?"

The unicorn under the hood restrained a chortle. He whinnied, "Why that is exactly correct. You too have enigmatic titles, do you not, Stable Dweller? Wasteland Heroine? We have been told that you are the Savior of the Wasteland and the Bringer of Light."

I cringed. They weren't titles I had ever wanted. Nor ones I had ever thought myself worthy of. And now I was under a spotlight, being judged for a reputation I couldn't control and couldn't live up to.

"What we want," The gentlestallion continued, "Is to know who are you, really?"

I snorted. "And you kidnapped me to find out? You could have just asked."

"These conversations are not for prying ears," another voice said from the darkness to my left.

"You have already been places you were not meant to be. Shown things no pony was allowed to reveal," a third voice said, this time to my right. Suddenly, I was worried for Homage. She'd clearly broken the rules of this overly-dramatic group of ponies to help me. What might they do in response? Murmurs rippled through the darkness around me. "You have used for your own goals the very secrets that we hold guardianship over."

Oh. "I know too much, right? Is that what this is?"

"That is but half of what this is," the gentlestallion said, addressing me. "We have been counseled to make available to you the full might and mystery of this place. We have not yet made our decision, yet you have availed yourself of our secrets anyway."

"You are a risk," claimed the voice from my right. "Not only to us but to all that could one day be accomplished with what we guard here."

I stomped. “Bullshit. I’ve heard that crap before. Two hundred years, and you’ve done nothing with what you have.” I turned, advancing towards the source of the voice on my right. A cloaked pony, hiding under a hood as he hid in the shadows. He backed up, bristling nervously.

“You’re hiding your secrets away because they’re special,” I spat. “And they make you feel special and important. Not because you’re ever going to put them to use to make a difference.”

“Tenpony Tower is a bastion of civilization in the wilderness,” the gentlestallion commented serenely. “I would suggest we have done quite a lot.”

“Yeah it is. But that isn’t you, is it?” I rounded on him. “The only damn one of you doing any good at all is…” I paused before I said her name. “…Is DJ Pon3.”

“At least she can keep a secret,” nickered yet a fourth voice from somewhere behind me.

“We are only the most recent inheritors of these secrets. You are unwise to judge us by the failures of those in generations past,” the gentlestallion said. I frowned, biting my tongue. He had a point.

“And perhaps you are right,” the gentlestallion said earnestly. “Perhaps it is time for us to make a greater use of what is hidden here. But to do so carries great risk, not only from the greedy and wicked outside our gates, but from within. Who can we trust to guide the use of this power and these resources? Who can we know will not become corrupted by it?”

I sighed heavily. “What do you want from me?” I asked. “How can I persuade you that I’m not going to become the next Red Eye if I’m given a little help?”

“Your memories.”

I jolted with shock. “W-what?”

“You had several days of memories extracted earlier today, from within our secluded chambers. We require access to those memories.”

They wanted… my memories? A chunk of my life? One that even I didn’t know the contents of? “No,” I stomped. “Those are my memories. They’re private!”

“We could ask you who you are, but you would only tell us what you want us to hear. The perceptions of others are fragments and heavily colored by their own perceptions. How better could we possibly learn who you really are?”

I fumed. I didn’t want to trust something so precious to these strangers. I didn’t trust them. I trusted Homage. That was all. Plus… It felt wrong. Like a violation. Which I knew was hypocritical at best considering how much time I’d spent prying into the memories of others.

The voice on my left intoned, “We already know that Red Eye is threatening this tower and the lives of everypony in it to motivate you. If you are playing with our lives, do you not think we at least deserve to know what the score is?”

I stopped fuming, considering that.

Finally, I took a deep breath. “Will I get them back?” If the answer was no, this deal was off. And if necessary, I would fight my way out of here.

“Of course,” the gentestallion told me.

“Fine. Then yes, but on two conditions.”

Underneath his robe, the gentestallion cocked his head, “And what conditions would those be?”

“One: the memories do not leave Homage’s possession. I trust her to guard them. So far, I have no reason to trust any of the rest of you.”

“Agreed. And two?”

“Homage continues to live here as long as she wants, safe from any repercussions for having helped me or for revealing what she did.”

More murmurs. Unhappy ones.

“Non-negotiable,” I said. I hoped I had this card to play. What if they decided that they really weren’t that interested in me after all?

But the gentlestallion answered, “Agreed…” I felt a sigh of relief.

“…Conditionally.” I felt my heart skip a beat. The robed pony elaborated, “No actions will be taken against Homage until all of us have had the opportunity to view the memory orbs. Should what they reveal of your character and methods persuade us to deem you an asset rather than a threat, then no action will be taken against her and record of her misdeeds will be expunged. If, however, your memories prove you are a menace to our society or this tower as a whole, then Homage will be judged accordingly.”

I knew that by agreeing to this, I would be putting my memories in jeopardy, running the risk that I might never see them. But in the end, what else could I do? My memories were a small price to pay compared to the potential rewards. I prayed that I had at least a shred of the sort of character that DJ Pon3 attributed to me. I was relying on myself to have been a decent pony.

* * *

I was given the memory orb again, and instructed to lose myself in it while they returned me back to the bench they took me from. All of which seemed utterly silly to me, but I went along anyway. I suspected Life Bloom was with them, and that made me feel just a touch safer, if only because Homage and Velvet seemed to think well of him.

When I came out of the memory orb for the second time, the feeling of déjà vu was almost enough to make me wonder if I had imagined the Twilight Society. I wondered how often ponies in Tenpony Tower suddenly found their days interrupted, and what the Twilight Society used when there wasn’t a convenient memory orb in play.

Revisiting the orb in the wake of my odd abduction had left me thinking about secrets. About the dissemination of information. Covert operations depended on secrecy for the safety of those involved. But it seemed cruel for Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie to leave Applejack and Rarity in the dark about Zecora, believing that a close friend of theirs had betrayed them. Was it necessary to cause them that pain? Could they have been trusted with that secret? Everything I had seen suggested that Rarity was well-practiced in keeping secrets, but Applejack? How convincing could the Bearer of the Element of Honesty be if put into a position where she had to maintain a lie? Was it better for everypony (and one zebra) that she not know?

I packed up the memory orb, checking my PipBuck to make sure the other one was still with me, and all my equipment was still in its proper place. Then, getting up, I started to walk down the hallway, away from the bathrooms. My mind was still engaged in contemplation.

Likewise, it was clear from several previous memories that the Mares knew the truth about zebra religion. Or at least knew enough about their beliefs regarding Nightmare Moon to try to use that against them. But SteelHooves had been blindsided by the idea. Clearly, a decision had been made by the heads of government not to inform the general population or even the lower ranks. I found myself second-guessing that decision, even though I could understand why. How demoralizing would that knowledge have been? Would knowing have served any positive purpose? Littlehorn was such a painful horror, the massacre of a school full of pony children, that it left a black and weeping wound in the psyche of Equestria.

Littlehorn had surely been a point of no return for both sides. At that point, I wondered if the ponies would have been any more capable of surrender than the zebras were.

A zebra dropped in front of me. I jumped back, already floating out Little Macintosh, my heart pounding. But recognition struck and relief passed over me. "Xenith, you scared me!" Flustered, I hastily slid Little Macintosh back in its holster. "I mean, uh, you… broke my train of thought."

"Brave little pony," she intoned.

"Where have you been?"

"Hiding," she said simply. "When they took you, I followed. But they did not seem to hurt or threaten you, so I did not act."

I suddenly felt a lot better about the day's strange interlude. At the same time, I realized that I needed to speak to Homage and let her know what was coming. If she didn't already.

"I'm going to see Homage," I said, not adding *if she'll let me.* "Are you okay following?" I remembered the zebra's discomfort with my Homage, and wondered if that was why I hadn't seen her all day. Well, that and her ability to hide like a living StealthBuck, and on the ceiling no less.

"If you wish."

I stopped. "Well, what do you wish?"

"It does not matter," Xenith informed me. "I am not welcome here, so I cannot do as I wish. For too many, my stripes make me the enemy. Or worse, a demon from the past responsible for all the misery in this world."

"That's unfair."

"It does not matter that it is unfair. It still is." She looked down. "Sometimes, I feel as if I am an earth pony and that my stripes are really great wounds, a punishment for some great wrong the ancestors of my ancestors were connected to."

I shuddered, as much at the pain and resignation in her voice as the mental image her words conjured. There had to be something I could do. "If you could do anything, what would you want to do most?"

"I would like to go shopping," Xenith said. She smiled at my surprise. "What? Everyone likes to shop. I would like to be able to stride into a store, look around, greeting the sales pony and make purchases. All while being treated only as rudely as every other pony customer is."

I felt a little rocked by the normalcy of the request. I tried to imagine how it must be not to even be able to go into a store. To buy. I couldn't, and I felt awful for it.

Surely there had to be a way to fix this.

* * *

“We could dye her coat a new color,” Homage suggested as she floated the huge painting of Splendid Valley away from her safe. She was moving my box of memory orbs to another location so that she would not have to reveal this safe when the Twilight Society came for them. “A near-black charcoal would hide her beautiful stripes enough for a modest gown and hat to obscure them completely. Although for the life of me, I can’t imagine wanting to do that.”

Homage turned and smiled warmly to Xenith. “You’re gorgeous the way you are.”

Xenith scowled.

“I’m being honest,” Homage insisted. “I’m sure my Littlepip has drank in the sight of you at least once. Haven’t you, Littlepip?” she asked, deliberately putting me in a humiliating spotlight. All the worse because I immediately thought of staring at Xenith’s flanks back in Stable Two.

“See?” Homage laughed. “That burning face means Littlepip’s been watching you.”

Xenith was staring at me. I sunk to the floor, putting my forehooves over my head. After a few excruciating moments, Xenith replied, “I am a zebra. And a scarred one at that.”

“Yes,” Homage agreed, unlocking her safe. “And a beautiful, sexy mare of a zebra at that.”

“A simple glamour should then mask your… zebra-ness from notice,” Homage suggested as she swung the door of the safe open. “But are you sure you want to hide who and what you are like this?”

“I hide all the time,” Xenith said simply. “This is no diff-”

Xenith made a slight choking noise, backing up, her eyes fixed on something just beyond Homage. At her reaction, we both followed her gaze.

The Star Blaster.

“You… have it locked away like a treasured possession…” Xenith intoned.

Homage frowned. “I have it locked up to keep it from hurting anypony.”

Xenith blinked. The zebra cast a look to me as she slowly asked, “Then you know that it yearns to kill.”

Homage gave me a quick quizzical look. I tried to return it with an expression that told her Xenith was deadly serious in the claim. Homage didn’t laugh. She didn’t look like she found the idea even a little funny.

“I’ll admit, I’m a much better shot with that thing than I’ve ever been with any other weapon I’ve tried, including other magical energy weapons. But I attribute that to magical energy weapons being damn rare in most parts of the Equestrian Wasteland, and all the others I have tried being poorly maintained pieces of rubbish.”

Xenith remained silent, waiting.

“No, I don’t think it actually wants to kill. I don’t believe that thing is alive or sentient,” Homage told her. “But I do believe that it was made by crafters with murderous intentions.”

“Crafters?” Xenith asked.

"It's a complex techno-magical tool. I don't think the stars just willed it into existence. Someone, or some*thing,* made it." She looked at the zebra, "Isn't that how the stars work? They help guide people to their own destruction?"

I was startled by the response. I remembered now that it was Homage who first spoke to me of the zebra's mythology. And she had spoken as one who put some credence to the notions.

"Then you… believe as we do?" Xenith asked slowly.

"I believe that most all religion is born of a mixture of truth and fantasy, hope and fear. How much truth is in any one mythology is hard to say." Homage pulled the box full of my memories from the safe before closing the safe up again, sealing the weapon from the stars away once more.

"But I believe that the amount of truth in the zebra's legends is a good bit more than zero. I don't believe that your ancient ancestors understood the stars nearly as much as they believed they did…"

Homage looked to me, addressing us both, "But I have seen enough to be certain that the void beyond the moon holds wonders and terrors far beyond our imaginations. And that at least some of what is out there is malicious beyond our conception of evil, and is looking this way with hostile intentions."

⁂

"I've changed my mind," claimed the exotic voice of the charcoal-black earth pony next to me who was really Xenith. "I like her."

Xenith the not-a-zebra was peering into jars of strange things floating in stranger liquids that lined the back shelf of the secluded apothecary which crouched around a corner from the main stores like a little colt hiding from bullies. The proprietor kept shooting us nasty looks, but I felt they were more directed at me than Xenith. She was dressed in a gown of subtle goldenrod and ivy, with a matching wide-brimmed hat. The entire ensemble made her look not only lovely, but right at home amongst the fine ladies and gentlestallions of Tenpony Tower.

I looked like me.

"Like who?" I asked before I realized the obvious answer. "Homage?" I suddenly felt a little giddy. The not-a-zebra nodded with a smile.

I wanted to dance around shouting "yes!"… but I was already getting enough looks from the proprieter.

Xenith had clearly been enjoying her evening, strolling openly down the streets, passing through the crowds, sitting down at the same restaurants and being served by the same snobbish waiters. Paying the same unreasonable prices as everypony else for confections made of sweet potato pudding and deep-fried apple sauce.

More than once, somepony had snidely suggested she take me to a dress shop, and gave her sympathetic looks, as if I was a younger relative she had been burdened with and my appearance was some sort of youthful rebellion. Sometimes I hated being small-framed.

"The selection here is wonderful," Xenith commented. "But I had not expected such high prices."

"In case you haven't noticed, miss," the stallion behind the counter grumped, "We're not getting any fresh product anytime soon. It's a seller's market."

The prices of everything in Tenpony Tower had tripled since the first time I had been here. Red Eye's blockade was killing commerce with the caravans and scavengers. I could feel an undercurrent of worry in the marketplace.

Earlier, a mare had snorted, exclaiming, "The mere thought of the wines meant for my cellar being sold instead in one of those dirty little places like Gutterville or Arbu gives me the vapors."

I had remembered how much I really didn't like the company of these ponies.

Shouts from outside drew our attention. Xenith smiled politely to the stallion glowering from behind the counter, saying, "We will be right back." He didn't look like he believed it and scowled at me as if I had been intentionally wasting his time. Backing away from him, I turned to follow Xenith out of the shop.

Ladies and gentlestallions gathered by the nearest outside windows in small crowds. Prim and proper young fillies and colts squirmed about, and climbed on their parents, momentarily forgetting proper decorum as they tried to get a peek.

Xenith, reveling in her ability to talk to these strangers, asked, "What is the commotion?" It surprised me not for the first time how easily she blended in now that the perceived stigma of her race had been obfuscated.

"The slavers," a colt replied as he quickly trotted past us, heading towards a window. "They're leaving!"

* * *

"I don't like this," I told Xenith as we stood at one of the windows, looking down through the darkness of early night. The burning lights of torches drifted away from the base of Tenpony Tower like rivulets of lava. Over half of Red Eye's forces were pulling out. "The only reason I can think of for Red Eye to withdraw before I fulfilled my end of the bargain is if he decided to blow the tower anyway. Now."

"But then, would he not remove all of his men?" Xenith asked cautiously.

"Not if he wanted to make sure we weren't able to evacuate," I suggested. Although I realized it didn't make much sense, I couldn't think of another reason for this behavior.

"Perhaps it is part of your cunning plan?" Xenith suggested hopefully.

"Doesn't feel like it."

* * *

"Aren't I supposed to be being punished?" I asked, sitting on Homage's bed inside Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum, staring out the huge windows at the retreating forces. I was tense. And worried. I wanted to know what Red Eye was up to. He was making a move. And while I had nothing but a gut instinct to base my opinions on, it didn't feel like this was something I'd predicted.

Throughout the tower, ponies were cautiously optimistic.

"I gave up," Homage admitted as she sat down behind me and began to massage my shoulders, working to relieve my tension. Xenith had convinced me not to assume the worst, but that didn't keep me from contemplating all the other avenues of bad.

Homage's gentle hooves worked in slow circles over my shoulders and down my spine, moving towards my flanks. I couldn't hold back a sigh.

My eyes flew open as a dark thought struck into my brain like a dagger. "Homage! You know I've been Tainted, right. The Goddesses only know what that vile stuff did to me. I might be… abnormal now."

Homage giggled softly – not at all the response I expected. "Love," she said, sending a thrill up my spine, "We've already had this conversation."

"Oh…" I said, feeling embarrassed. Homage planted kisses up the length of my mane.

"The highlights: both Doctor Helpinghoof and Life Bloom have given you a look over. There is a tiny mutation, but it is benign. Nothing to worry about." She gave one of my ears a nibble. "The fact that you risked Taint for me and the ponies of this tower has not gone unnoticed. Or unappreciated, especially by me."

I felt relief. The dagger in my brain melted away.

"I've even checked you over myself, quite thoroughly, and you are definitely still my Littlepip."

My ears shot up as she whispered, "Orb number eight."

* * *

I held Homage in my forelegs, nuzzling her softly. She leaned into me, her body warm, her breathing pleasantly heavy.

"Homage," I asked with trepidation. I didn't want to spoil the night.

"Yes love?" Homage's sweet voice panted gently up to me.

"Are you… doing all right?"

"After that? Ooooh yes." She giggled.

I tickled her absently, enjoying the ability to just touch her. "You know what I mean. Things here have been… rough lately. And a few days ago, what you had to do to save us…"

Homage sighed and curled around to look at me even though we couldn't really see each other in the darkness. "After all you've been through for me, you're still more worried about me than yourself."

That was… a dodge. And I wasn't going to let her get away with it. "Doesn't change the question."

"Jokeblue was usually the one doing the shooting," Homage admitted. "I have only taken a life a few times (not counting beasts and robots) but each time it was to save somepony… although sometimes that pony was myself." She reached a hoof up to brush my muzzle. "I don't like it. I don't enjoy it. And I'm really no good at it. But I don't regret it."

* * *

The next morning, a light rain had begun to drizzle, spotting the windows and making the grey-on-grey of the Manehattan Ruins into a monochromatic haze. I had used my binoculars to search the ground below, startled to find that only a third of Red Eye's forces remained. But they looked like they were camped out permanently.

My heart felt heavy, and my head was foggy from a lack of sleep, the latter being entirely Homage's fault. Not that I minded. Not even slightly. But I was beginning to feel guilty for the amount of attention she lavished on me compared to the other way around. I couldn't do anywhere near the things to her that she could do to me, and I was beginning to feel inadequate in comparison. I'd reached the point where I was going to have to start asking her for instructions. A request that, no matter how I tried to phrase it in my head, always sounded pathetic rather than romantic.

The little red wagon squeaked along behind me.

I stopped as I reached the door to our suite. This time I raised a hoof and knocked. Twice.

Calamity opened the door, smiling. "Howdy, Li'lpip. Mornin'."

"Good morning to you too, Calamity. I see you're in a good mood."

"Ayep."

"Are we ready to do this?"

Calamity grinned. "Ah reckon she's been ready fer a few days now." He flapped his wings, scooting out of the way.

Velvet Remedy lay on the edge of her bed (and Calamity's now, I was willing to bet), her plaster-bound leg stretched out uncomfortably in front of her. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the wagon. Then narrowed. "What exactly is that for?"

"Today's the big day," I said sweetly. "Ready to go to the Clinic and get that cast removed?"

"I can remove it myself," Velvet Remedy insisted. "And you're not hauling me around in that."

I wrapped her in a telekinetic blanket and floated my unicorn friend into the air.

"Put me down."

"Doc's orders," Calamity reminded Velvet. "Helpinghoof wants t' get a good look at yer leg t' make sure everythin' healed proper."

"We're your friends," I chimed in as she waved her legs helplessly in the air. "We insist you get the best treatment and won't let you skimp out on it. You've always given us the best care and often shortchanged your own. Not this time."

I floated her down onto the wagon. She tried sticking her legs down and pushing away, but with her cast, it was a losing battle. Finally, she tucked her three good legs in and settled into the little red wagon.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you."

"Yep," I said with a smile. I turned and strode out the door, pulling her slowly through the hall towards the elevator in the very same wagon she had once hauled me to the very same place in.

* * *

"You were right," I told Velvet as Doctor Helpinghoof did one final examination of my friend's foreleg. There was a slim scar that encircled her leg. It wouldn't even be visible when her coat had grown back.

Velvet Remedy looked up at me as she flexed her foreleg in every possible way at the doctor's insistence. Life Bloom was standing nearby, his horn glowing as a spell allowed Helpinghoof to examine the inner working's of Velvet's leg.

"You said that I can't be trusted," I reminded her. She sighed heavily and started to say something that would surely have been comforting, but I didn't let her. I needed to say this. "And where Party-Time Mint-als are concerned, you are right. I can't be trusted."

I frowned, trying to push the words out of my muzzle, knowing I had to. "I don't know if I really needed them. There's a chance I never will." She didn't know the context of that; only Homage and Xenith knew that my memories were now being reviewed by the Twilight Society. "But I do know that when confronted with the chance to slip some into my saddlebags, I wasn't strong enough."

Velvet Remedy was looking at me sadly.

"So from now on, I need you to do what you said you would. Go through my things. Check my PipBuck. Maybe Life Bloom can teach you a PTM-detection spell. Whatever it takes." I trembled a little, hearing the tone of begging creep into my voice. "Please. I want your help. I need it."

Slowly, Velvet nodded. "Of course, Littlepip."

"Well," Doctor Helpinghoof announced, "I'd say you've made a miraculous recovery, young lady. You're fit to go." He looked to Calamity, "You can settle up the bill with Life Bloom on your way out."

Calamity nodded, wrapping his recently-wounded wing around Velvet in a snug. Looking to me, he asked, "So, where to next?"

I pressed my lips together, thinking. "The Canterlot Ruins are our goal now. But we have a few places to visit along the way. The village that Xenith believes her daughter lives in is on our way. But first, we need to arm ourselves with all the information we can on surviving in the Pink Cloud. And that means our next trip has to be back to Stable Twenty-Nine."

The others nodded in agreement. "We need SteelHooves."

* * *

◆

It was a particularly beautiful day in Ponyville. The sun was shining, pouring a warmth down on the Equestrian village that cheered both the land and the soul. Only a few clouds spotted the sky, and a mint-green pegasus flew about overhead, belatedly kicking them away. Below, brightly-colored ponies trotted about their daily business, often stopping to give a neighborly hello to those they passed on the street. A trio of bunnies darted between bushes, carrying radishes pilfered from somepony's garden.

"Oh my…" Fluttershy said, watching through strands of solid pink mane as the bunnies darted between her legs. For a moment, she seemed ready to break away from the other ponies she was walking with to fly after them.

"New feller's doin' all right," Applejack commented, looking up into the sky. "But it just ain't the same without Rainbow Dash."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Twilight Sparkle told her, floating a letter out of her saddlepack. “I got a letter from the Princess today. She says that Rainbow Dash isn’t just on a vacation. She’s signed up for the new Equestrian Skyguard.”

“Poor dear took what happened to the Wonderbolts really hard,” Rarity commented, adjusting her newest hat creation so the feathers all flowed with the gentle summer breeze. “I can’t say that I blame her.”

“Yes, well, the Princess doesn’t want to see her get put in harm’s way, but it wouldn’t be right for Her to tell Dash no. So…” Twilight opened the letter as the others gathered around her, listening intently, “…Princess Celestia has given us a mission. We’re to travel to the buffalo and try to strengthen diplomatic ties with them. Given Rainbow Dash’s previous experience with them, the Princess feels that she would be the ideal envoy.”

“Oh goodie!” Pinkie Pie bounced. “I’ve been working on my song and I think…”

“Oh hay no,” moaned Applejack.

“Oh dear,” winced Rarity.

“umm…” umm’ed Fluttershy.

“No singing!” Twilight Sparkle said sternly.

“But…”

“No singing,” she repeated. “Princess’s orders.”

“Awwwww.”

“Twilight, Darling,” Rarity asked, concerned. “Did Princess Celestia say why exactly we are strengthening diplomatic ties with the buffalo? I mean, other than to keep Rainbow Dash occupied?”

Twilight shook her head. A heavy silence fell over the group of friends that was distinctly at odds with the cheery brightness of the day.

Applejack was the one who broke it. “Ah heard talk from some o’ the folk at the farmer’s expo last week. They’re sayin’…” She paused, as if scared of the words she was thinking and what would happen if she said them out loud. “…we might be a’headin’ t’ *war.*”

Fluttershy gasped and disappeared behind a stump.

“Th-that’s impossible, Applejack. Equestria has never had a real war in…” Twilight Sparkle paused, clearly running through her vast studies of Equestrian history. And finding nothing. “…I don’t think Equestria has ever had a war. At least, not in over a thousand years.”

“Yeah, well, we all know how mighty stubborn ponies c’n get when their livelihoods are bein’ threatened. Only this time, Ah fear it ain’t gonna be pies they’re throwin’. Big Mac brought home one o’ them new-fangled firearms t’ take care o’ the cockatrice that’s been attackin’ our pigs…”

Applejack was interrupted by an upset squeak from Fluttershy, who had finally managed to come back out from behind her stump. “He wouldn’t!”

“Sorry, Fluttershy,” Applejack said apologetically. “But that thing was killin’ our pigs. Sometimes, ya just gotta take care o’ dangerous predators the hard way.”

“You should have told me! I could have stopped him for you,” Fluttershy said, uncharacteristically raising her voice just a smidgeon. “Now your pigs will stay dead forever, you know. Only a cockatrice can reverse its own magic. And he would have if I’d had the chance to tell him to.”

“What?” Applejack moaned. “Nuts and shrews.”

Fluttershy turned meekly to Twilight Sparkle. “There’s not really going to be a…” Her voice faltered on the word ‘war’, becoming barely a squeak, “…will there?”

“I hope not,” Twilight said. “I don’t know what we’d do if there was.”

“But… people would get hurt. And animals.” Fluttershy was trembling just at the thought. “We can’t let that happen. We just can’t.”

“I think that’s why the Princess wants us to start talking to the buffalo,” Twilight said unsurely.

“Well, whatever the reason, we’ll do this together,” Rarity asserted. “Give me a few days to close up my shop, and I’ll be ready for the trip.”

The others nodded. “Yer right. Ain’t nothin’ we can’t handle together,” Applejack said, smiling at Rarity.

“Right,” Twilight Sparkle said, back on firmer ground. “Whatever the cause, Princess Celestia has given us this mission and we will not fail.” This was familiar to her. She’d done this before, and she could do it again. “Everypony, make whatever arrangements you need to. We may be gone from Ponyville for a while. I’m going to go get Rainbow Dash. Let’s meet back here in less than two days.” The faith she had in her friends virtually radiated from her.

All her friends nodded, Fluttershy looking both exceptionally nervous and particularly determined. Then everypony galloped off, leaving the yellow pegasus standing on the path alone.

“Oh, so much to do. But we must not fail. We must not, must not, must not.” She fretted. “Who will take care of my animals?”

“Can I help?” my host asked, flying up to the distraught yellow pegasus.

“Oh!” Fluttershy jumped. Then crouched meekly, looking around until she spotted me. “Oh, hello Ditzy Doo. I didn’t see you there.” She looked away shyly. “Um… sure, if you would like?”

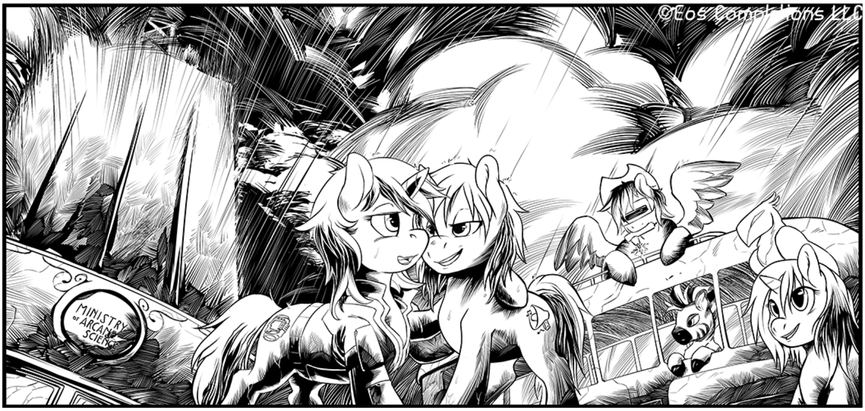
I felt my host smile happily. Today was a good day.

* * *

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Thirty-Three

Crusaders



"I am impervious to such corrupting ambitions."

Rain.

What had started out as a light drizzle in the morning was a gusty downpour by early afternoon with ambitions towards a brutal deluge by the evening. The Manehattan Ruins matched the clouds above in a montage of grey on grey, made hazy by a screen of precipitation.

Raindrops bombed the puddles on the roof of Tenpony Tower, swelling them until their edges pushed together, kissing and coupling into miniature lakes. Xenith's hooves splashed through them as she carried the last of our supplies across to the *Sky Bandit.* I watched as she rose up on her hindhooves and passed the bag to Calamity, who stored it inside. My gaze lingered on her, taking in the stripes that covered her back, rippling a little as the muscles beneath her coat moved. I had to agree with Homage; I liked her better this way. As pleased as I was to give her the opportunity to shop and mingle amongst the ponies of Tenpony Tower, I was happy to see her stripes again.

Removing the dye had been a little more difficult than I had anticipated. It would have taken weeks for her coat to resume its color naturally, or multiple herbal baths that would have depleted supplies Xenith insisted were best kept for other uses. So we sought out Life Bloom, hoping he might know a spell that would remove the false coloring. Fortunately, he did, and he offered to teach it to us for a small fee.

Velvet Remedy jumped at the opportunity. She was certain that the spell should fall within the boundaries of her magical prowess. Cosmetic magic was at least tangentially related to the medical and entertainment spells that came natural to her, after all. I recalled how easily she had cleaned the Sky Bandit with her magic once; I expected this to be even easier. But while Velvet was capable of casting the spell, it proved surprisingly taxing for her and yielded somewhat limited effects. The dye had faded only enough to turn Xenith's once-white coat a muddy grey.

I gave it my best effort, but in vain. My horn would not even deign to glow as I poured my concentration into the spell. In the end, we had to pay Life Bloom to cast it himself.

"You're staring at her ass, aren't you," Homage whispered into my ear, startling me just as my gaze had slid down to linger on Xenith's rear.

My ears shot up in alarm, and I felt myself blushing as I stammered, "What? N-no. I was just… plotting. That's it! With the plan and the plot and things."

Homage chuckled. "Sure you were."

Adopting a musing tone, the grey unicorn teased softly, "Next time, I'll try to give you those *instructions* you wanted." I blushed harder, thankful that she wasn't speaking loudly enough for my friends to hear. "Although I'm not sure how. You're such a delightfully sensitive thing that when I demonstrate on you, you have a hard time focusing on the lesson." Luna's mercy. My ears were burning. "And I'll admit it would be difficult for me to concentrate as well."

Homage leaned close and whispered in my ear, "Maybe bringing in a third party would be in order? Xenith perhaps?"

I felt myself splash into the puddle before I realized my legs had gone out from under me. The rooftop water was cold and soaked beneath my armor, getting trapped against my coat and skin.

Homage giggled. She was joking of course. She had to be. As I picked myself up, my mind had already dug out half a dozen reasons why a threesome with Xenith was out of the question, not the least of which being that the striped mare didn't like to be touched. But the little grey unicorn had planted the seeds of a fantasy in my head now, knowing it would not make my time away from her any easier.

I shot Homage an annoyed glare, deciding this was probably her revenge for my having responded to one of her favorite *toys* with a lack of enthusiasm.

"You're just a little bit evil," I hissed. "You know that, right?"

* * *

"What's this?" I asked as Velvet Remedy floated some sort of railing onto the roof of the *Sky Bandit.*

"Luggage rack. Sorta," Calamity said as he landed on the top of the rain-slicked passenger wagon and began to tug straps tight. "Ah figured, the way SteelHooves took on that Star-spawn thing while standin' on the roof worked out mighty good. Settin' up a mountin' position fer a pony t' ride topside even if Ah need t' do some fancy maneuverin'."

As Calamity pulled a little welder out of his saddlebags, the reward (I assumed) of recent bartering, Velvet Remedy primly added, "It can also carry luggage."

Putting down the welder and checking his work, Calamity suggested, "Ah reckon it wouldn't hurt t' put some armor on 'er too. Would slow us down, an' Ah'd have t' take breaks more often. But some ablative plates would make 'er a whole lot safer."

I got the feeling Calamity was expecting a fight I didn't know was coming. Was this part of the plan to deal with the Goddess? Something I had made sure I wouldn't be aware of? Or maybe this had to do with his new concerns regarding the Enclave. If it was the former, we would be better off if I didn't ask him about it. Pressing the issue would leave him in the uncomfortable position of having to lie to me. Worse, I could cause him to slip and give away something important. I would just have to trust him.

My thoughts flicked back to the memory orbs I had viewed yesterday. According to Calamity, I had told him it was safe for me to view them. Had I known about them, I would have been driven to distraction by curiosity. But I had not been aware of them until Calamity had set them on the table and sent them rolling towards me. Now I wondered if this was just a gift to myself, or if there was some piece of information in those orbs I felt I needed to know.

The first orb held a potential wealth of information. Two elements stood out amongst the others, the first being the vision of The Black Book. Clearly, The Black Book was itself a soul jar. At first, I wondered if Rarity herself had made it one, but I dismissed the idea quickly. Far more likely, it had been infused with the soul of the mad zebra alchemist who had written it. If the zebras feared and loathed everything they associated with the stars, and The Black Book was supposedly dictated to that mad zebra in dreams, this explained how the book could have survived destruction for generations in zebra lands before finding its way here. And it would certainly have enhanced and given credence to the darkest legends that formed around it.

Furthermore, I recalled that soul jars could have other magic "hung" on them. Who knew what mystical effects The Black Book might be asserting over anypony in its vicinity?

The other aspect of the orb which stood out to me was the conversation between Rainbow Dash and those three bucks. In that argument, I had witnessed the beginnings of the Enclave. The orb spoke to a spreading sentiment amongst the pegasus ponies – a resentment of their sacrifices in a war that they believed themselves literally above – that had even reached the heart of at least one pegasus in a position of power. One who would be killed as the first zebra megaspell annihilated Cloudsdayle.

And with it, an acknowledgement that Rainbow Dash, heroine of the war, leader of the Shadowbolts, had become a driving force behind the pegasi's escalating involvement in the fighting. I recalled a news article in the Fillydelphia Ministry of Image hub: in response to the zebra's recruitment of dragons, Luna intended to strengthen Equestria's pegasi forces. Rainbow Dash's new magically-powered armor, I suspected, was at least one part of that.

Rainbow Dash had become an icon of pegasi participation, both to those who supported it and those who had grown to despise it… the Dashites were an almost foregone conclusion.

The isolationist core of the Enclave was at odds with Calamity's worries. Unless… unless they threatened the Gardens of Equestria. Icy fear shot through my body at the idea. But if that was true, surely that wasn't something I'd want to forget. I would need to act on it immediately! No pony would keep me from joining Spike in his defense of that cave, least of all myself.

The second orb had been a deeply bittersweet experience. I felt such happiness and sadness at seeing five of the mares I had grown to know and love in a warmer and happier time, a spring before the summer of war that would bring such heartache and horror to all of them. They had stood on the precipice of something terrible, and they had loved and laughed and danced.

The memory, to the best I could see, was of no strategic value. This was not the first I had heard of their mission to the buffalo, although now I had much more context. Instead, this was a vision into the beauty of the past, a reminder of what ponies had been. And what, I prayed, could… *would* one day be again.

"Prayer alone is not enough," I murmured to myself. No, for our world to change, there had to be action. There had to be ponies who would stand up to the darkness and Stare it down. I would be such a pony.

"hmmm?" Homage said, standing next to me again. I was so soaked by the rain now that the discomfort from the puddle earlier had been forgotten. "You look lost in thought so deep you could be in a memory orb."

I grimaced. I reached into my saddlebags and floated out the Ditzy Doo orb, passing it to Homage. "I want you to have this," I told her. "You've been my voice in the darkness more than once. If things ever get too bleak for you to find your way to hope, watch this. Let her be your guide back."

Homage cocked her head curiously. With half-lidded eyes, she whispered, "I won't need it. You are my guide." But she slipped a telekinetic blanket of her own around the gift, taking it anyway.

"I would fight to make that bright and innocent past our future once again," I said, turning to her. "Even if it means dashing myself against the evil and cruelty of this wasteland until there is nothing left of me." Like the ponies who cracked and shattered their hoofs pounding at the sealed door of Stable Two, I would persevere, making Equestria a better place one battle at a time. Until there was nothing left for me to give. "And then, when I am too broken to go on, I will float my dying body right down the throat of the darkness and make it choke on me."

Homage gave me a sad, knowing look. Then leaned forward and nuzzled my cheek softly.

Forcing a smile, I chuckled. "Or, you know, this could all end in sunshine and rainbows. No need to get pessimistic."

Homage laughed despite the tears that had begun to well in her eyes. Or maybe that was just the rain.

"Speaking of orbs," I said, changing the subject.

Homage blinked in the rain and smiled wanly. "Got it. If they want to see your memories in order to get to know you, then they need to have as much context as possible. So anyone viewing them is required to watch them in order, starting with the first."

"Perfect," I replied, now wearing a more genuine smile.

"Although I'd prefer we kept orb number eight to ourselves," Homage added. And for the first time, I saw *her* blush.

"So would I," I admitted dourly, "But at the time I figured that denying them one of the orbs would undermine the notion that I have nothing to hide from them. Sadly, I still think so."

Homage nodded. "Indeed it would." Her gaze shifted off to the side. "Maybe I can persuade them it isn't necessary. At least after the first pony sees it." Knowing what she could do to me, I doubted anypony would pass up the opportunity to experience that. The thought of people enjoying Homage's attentions meant only for me, *as* me, felt slimy. It was a violation that made me sick inside. This was not a sacrifice I wanted to make. But knowing how much good the secrets locked away inside the hidden chambers of Tenpony Tower could do for all of Equestria, the pony in my heart demanded it.

"Can I ask why?" Homage questioned. I blinked. She had to know why I was willing to let the Twilight Society into my memories. Seeing my confusion, she clarified, "I caught that smile. You're planning something. Why the instructions, if it's not just about context?"

"Oh!" I bit back a snicker. "Well, it's just that those memories cover, what, two days? And it takes as long to view a memory as the events themselves. And, unlike when I lived them, those ponies will have to take breaks. Stop, eat, sleep, do whatever work those ponies do…" I shrugged. "I figure, if we're lucky, by the time they get to the more telling orbs, everything will be over. And if not? Well, at least I will have forced a whole bunch of hoity-toity ponies in Tenpony Tower to eat zebra cooking and like it."

Homage broke into a laugh. The mare threw her arms around me, hugging me so fiercely we both fell into the small lake that had formed on the roof.

I splashed her. She splashed back. The two of us lay there in the cold, pooling water, kicking waves and sprays at each other until I could swear we were wetter than the rain was.

"Give up?" she squealed. Absolutely not! My finishing move was to telekinetically grasp about a barrel full of the water, hovering it over her head. I pointed up with a hoof and got a most delightful squeak out of her before dropping the deluge onto my Homage.

"Okay, okay, I give up!" she cried out. Slowly, we both got to our hooves. Homage was shivering, dripping, her blue hair hanging straight down like a wet curtain. She was impossibly beautiful.

"Ready to go?" Velvet's voice called out kindly from within the *Sky Bandit.* I turned to see that Calamity had finished attaching the mounting on the passenger wagon's roof and was already harnessing himself to the front.

I looked back to Homage. "I've got to go."

I smiled. "But you will never be far. I'll be tuned in, listening to your message of hope…" I gave her horn a soft kiss. "…DJ Pon3."

The somber mood of our former conversation seeped back, making my sopping coat feel all the chillier.

"Promise me you'll see me again."

"Pinkie Pie Swear."

* * *

The *Sky Bandit* cut through the heavy mid-afternoon downpour. Calamity was getting a miserable drenching. He had hoofwaved off Velvet Remedy's offer of a protective shield, claiming he was already as wet as he was going to get after attaching the new roof mounting. The claim was half bravado and half being Just Plain Wrong. Now, while he said nothing, I could tell he was regretting it.

Not that any of the rest of us weren't dripping wet. The passenger wagon, with its broken windows, provided only cursory protection from the elements. Soon, all the benches were soaked and the metal floor ran with rivulets of water. The tarps covering our gear kept our supplies partially dry, but water was seeping underneath to soak the bottoms of packs and bags.

Pyrelight kept giving us miserable, mewling hoots. Velvet Remedy had tried using her cleaning spell to dry us over and over; but it had been an uphill battle, and after an hour she gave up.

Velvet and I were huddled together on some benches in the back of the passenger wagon. Velvet Remedy's horn glowed, a soft melody seeming to pour out of it. "More like that?" she asked me. All I could do was nod, feeling a little stunned.

"Did you… just come up with that now?" I asked timidly, amazed once again by how easily she could create entirely new music and have it be utterly beautiful.

"Well, yes, but I've had years of practice," Velvet Remedy admitted. "And it is one of my natural talents." Giving me a motherly look, she advised, "Before I can create the music for your song, Littlepip, you should really come up with some lyrics. At least enough for me to know the rhythm and meter you wish to use."

I gave a deep sigh. The idea had sounded so good in my heart last night, and so easy in my head this morning. I wanted to create a song that expressed my feelings for Homage. Not something sappy, but an honest, earnest outpouring of my heart. Something that I could have Velvet Remedy perform next time we went to Tenpony Tower as a special gift for the "disc jockey" pony who had let me fall in love with her.

With Velvet Remedy by my side, I had thought I could have something at least halfway decent by the time we reached Stable Twenty-Nine. But…

"I'm just no good at lyrics. Coming up with words is…" I sighed. "…really hard."

"Let me help," Velvet suggested, listening to what I had so far and politely trying not to wince.

Within a few hours, Velvet and I had put together a few passable lines, stringing them into what could be a full verse. Or the two halves of two different verses. I wasn't sure yet.

"…In the warmth of your embrace, I've found acceptance,
And I know our moments, through all my adversities,
In my darkest hour will save and anchor me.
And I will kiss the orb that holds these memories…"

Velvet Remedy sang my lyrics experimentally, smiling at how they came off her tongue this time. "Much better. Although I still think some of your other phrases are a little *too* specific."

I shook my head. "This is from me to her. It's personal. It *should* be specific." I was being stubborn in the face of wisdom, but it was my song, and I rather liked the line: *I've been crushed under the train car of loneliness.*

Velvet Remedy gave me a patient and charmingly understanding smile, and I knew she would manage to talk me into changing the line before the night was over.

* * *

The storm continued to escalate, the winds blowing the rain sideways and tearing at Calamity hard enough that we were stopping every hour to give him rest. Even flying, our progress had become achingly slow as Calamity continuously fought to correct our course as the wind blew us off our path. I hated seeing him work so hard for us.

The third time we landed, we were able to take shelter in the overhang of the remnants of a recharging station somewhere in the holocaust-blasted remains of a small business community which had once sprawled between Manehattan and Fetlock. I spotted a mostly intact storeroom in the otherwise collapsed building. On the door was a faded and stained poster of a genial Twilight Sparkle. *Knowledge is Magic* insisted the words above her friendly smile. And in smaller font beneath: *The Ministry of Arcane Sciences is Looking for a Few Bright Minds. Together, We Will Save Equestria!* Equally ancient graffiti scrawled across the poster. Partial words – *ight the Mini* – drove me to imagine the poster had been moved, the rest of the rebellious words left behind on a wall somewhere.

Calamity unhitched himself and trotted into the supply room to have a good shake while the rest of us starting digging through our supplies for the boxes of Pony Joe's Donut Holes and cans of sweet potatoes which would be our dinner. I eyed the boxes dubiously; I had overcome my squeamishness for eating two-hundred-year-old food, but I still planned to give the donut holes a pass. Calamity returned as Pyrelight was giving the cans a warming (and slightly radioactive) breath-bath. He was less soaked and unsurprisingly more laden with scavenged goods.

"Ah'm gonna swap out the spark batteries while we're sittin'," Calamity announced as Velvet Remedy magically cleaned away the rest of the water from his fur and feathers. "Ah don't want us losin' 'em in the middle o' the storm."

Velvet Remedy gasped. "Don't you dare. You've already worked hard enough. And now you're finally dry. You will not immediately go wallowing around in the mud under this wagon. You rest. One of us will change them out for you."

By necessity, that meant me. But I was more than happy to be volunteered.

"Well," Calamity looked thankful for the offer and the chance to rest his sore and aching wings. "Ah figure maybe we oughta hunker down fer a bit, till the storm loses some o' its rage." We all readily agreed. I knew from experience that rain in the Equestrian Wasteland could last for days, but I hoped the worst part would pass within a few hours. The burning white flash of nearby lightning turned the world into stark light and black shadow. Calamity looked over his shoulder and said something more, but his words were drowned out by a pealing roar of thunder that shook bits of debris from the cracks in the overhang.

Minutes later, I squirmed under the Sky Bandit. The slosh sliding under my body wasn't exactly mud but a gritty mixture of water and ashes. I tried not to think of who I might have been laying in. Surely most of the ash was from incinerated buildings, right?

As I telekinetically removed the screws on the plate covering the spark battery array, I heard a familiar marching music leaking through the storm. An approaching sprite-bot. The music grew louder as the floating radio drew near, the tinny quality of the music more noticeable through the white noise of the rain.

A burst of static killed the music. The sprite-bot went silent.

"Hello, Watcher."

"Hey, Littlepip. Been a while, and I can tell you've been busy."

I laughed ruefully as I thought of just how much I'd been through since I'd last spoken to Spike. "How are things at your… house?" I asked, an itch of paranoia preventing me from referencing the cave more directly. "Are the… um… unwanted house guests giving you any more trouble?"

"Actually, they've been really quiet recently. I don't know if they're preoccupied or just avoiding the place." Changing topics, "You haven't, by any chance, found any other… others, have you?"

Wow, this conversation was awkward. "No. Not yet. But I'm looking."

"Thanks."

We were either dancing around something, or we really had nothing to say to each other. I felt a resurgence of the pain caused by realizing I was not the heroine that Spike had been looking for. I was not one of the ponies who could make everything right. For a brief, sparkling moment I had thought I knew my purpose, only to have that hope dashed against the cold rocks of an unforgiving reality.

But then, the Gardens of Equestria wasn't going to make everything right with the wave of a hoof and a rainbow of good intentions. Even after it purges the taint from the world, the mutated monsters that taint has created will still be left behind. The alicorns, those *things* from the hospital (if any survived), bloatsprites, hellhounds. Even after it washes the tint from the air, the world will still be trapped under the depressing bleakness of the constant cloud cover. Even though it will rid the world of radiation, it will not exorcise the evil that has festered in the hearts of so many ponies. Raiders and slavers will not disappear like the poisons in the soil.

In short, there was so much more to do. And I didn't have to be destined to be something great or important or vital. I just had to do something good.

And if I could help a little towards something as great as the Gardens of Equestria, that was just icing on the cupcake.

The pause had stretched to uncomfortable lengths. Finally, Watcher said, "Well, I guess I should be going then."

"Wait," I said, suddenly having a question. "Can non-ponies ever be bearers of the Elements of Harmony?" Maybe I needed to widen my search.

"Uh, no, I don't think so."

"Oh." Well, it was worth asking. I searched my mind for anything else to say. Finally, the star-spawn in the room couldn't be avoided any longer. "Sp… Watcher. I know what happened to Twilight Sparkle."

Silence. Thunder rumbled in the background. Then, "Oh."

Spike was silent a little while longer, before finally daring, "Please, tell me she went quickly. Without pain. It was fast, wasn't it?"

A rock lodged in my throat. As I felt my ears paste back, I was thankful that I was beneath the *Sky Bandit,* the passenger wagon shielding him from my expression. I opened my muzzle, but I didn't have the breath to speak.

I… couldn't tell him. He didn't deserve that. She was his closest friend – a sister, mother and best friend all in one – and the weight of this horror was too much. The pain of knowing now, and knowing that maybe some part of Twilight was still in the Goddess, alive but no longer herself or even sane, and had been for centuries…

I realized I was going to lie to Spike. *Corrupted kindness,* a pony's voice hissed in my mind, but it wasn't the voice of my little pony; it was the voice of the Goddess.

"She died trying to save other ponies, Spike. It was a noble death." She died crying out a name. Was it his? "And… I believe she was thinking about you fondly as she passed. I think she was happy you weren't there, that you survived."

It was an utter, bold-faced lie. Except my face was not bold, and no pony would have believed me if they had been able to see me. No dragon, either, no matter how much he needed to.

Another long pause. "Thank you, Littlepip." The mechanical voice of the sprite-bot couldn't convey emotion, but I could still tell that hidden in his cave, the mighty dragon Spike was crying.

"Did you… find her body? Is she buried?"

I felt a hard pang try to tear apart my heart. After a moment of panic, I let out a shuddering breath. "No, Spike. I saw her death on a recording. But… after she was dead, the Goddess… ate her body."

Utter quiet from the sprite-bot, from Watcher, from Spike.

"I'm going to end the Goddess," I said, and this time truth flowed in every word. "And if, by a miracle, there's anything left of Twilight, I will put her to rest."

* * *

The fury of the storm beat upon the wasteland for most of the night, finally exhausting its rage and slipping back into an almost peaceful drizzle, like a snoring yao guai. We reached Stable Twenty-Nine in that foreboding hour of darkness whose name I could not remember.

I gently told Pyrelight to stay behind and guard the *Sky Bandit.* Considering the plethora of monsters that we had encountered in Fetlock before, it was a reasonable precaution. But in truth, I just didn't want to bring a radioactive bird into the Outcast's new home base.

Outcasts, their Steel Ranger armor bearing stripes of red, took battle stances at our approach. I saw them tense. A moment later, soft light erupted around us and Velvet Remedy's satin voice rang out through the darkness.

"Hail, followers of Applejack. Littlepip and her Entourage bid you welcome and request an audience with SteelHooves."

Hearing Velvet Remedy refer to us like that was uncomfortable. I didn't deserve that sort of credit or attention. But more, I didn't want my friends thinking of themselves that way. Still, as I watched the Outcasts relax, I was thankful for her diplomacy. Two of the former Steel Rangers trotted over to us, flanking us as we were guided towards the door of Stable Twenty-Nine.

I recalled with a shiver my last visit here. Since then, new scorch marks littered the walls of the maintenance tunnel. Bullet casings littered the floor, and dark stains told of the ferocious engagements between the Outcasts and the Steel Rangers as they vied for control of the Stable and the Crusader computer inside.

One of our escorts motioned to another guard who stood at the control mechanism for the Stable door. A cable ran from the guard's magically-powered armor to the controls; she didn't even need to throw a switch. With a teeth-hurting grind and a hydra-like hiss, the huge gear-shaped door was pulled open on its internal arm.

We marched forward. As I set hoof into the Stable, part of me couldn't believe I was returning here. I remembered vividly the events and emotions of my previous excursion into this place. As we walked, I was relieved to see that the Outcasts had taken the time to clear the bodies away, and young knights were making headway on the rest of the detritus that littered the floors of the Atrium. My first time here, I was bothered by the wrongness of the Stable's layout. It did not conform to Stable Two, to the way a Stable should be. Now, after my final visit to Stable Two, there was no such feeling. Seeing the death and destruction visited upon Stable Two had stained its memory for me. There no longer was a "proper" Stable.

There had been fighting inside as well as out. One of the columns in the Atruim, previously whole, was now smashed. The floor showed the sort of damage only a grenade machinegun would cause. I spared a glance towards the Clinic, shuddering a little as I remembered the Atrium guns pinning us in there. Those turrets were now replaced by models bearing the Outcasts' colors and three-apple symbol. I wondered what Applejack would have thought of her cutie mark on turrets facing into a Stable.

My gaze traveled to the grey-tiled roof, and down the catwalks that hugged plain grey walls. Morosely, I thought: *this room needs a mural.*

The two Outcasts led us up the stairs to the second level. I glanced at the bulletin board as we passed. The old messages and notices had been cleared away. The board itself had been bleached clean. Its ghastly message written in pony blood existed now only in memories.

The final resting place of Vinyl Scratch, the little pony in my head reminded me. *The tomb of the original DJ Pon3.* I quickly chose not to dwell on that. Down that path lay dark things.

We walked by a couple of knights, one hauling a trash cart, the other walking behind her, chatting amiably. "This place could really use some colorful posters. Not to mention a few throw rugs. Maybe some curtains."

"This place isn't exactly rich with windows," the other said pointedly. "And I don't think Elder SteelHooves is the sort to embrace draperies."

I covered a snicker with a hoof.

"Truuuuuue. But he'd probably go for the idea of posters."

"Good luck finding a good one for us now. All the Ministry of Wartime Technology posters just say 'PROGRESS' and have images of tech advancements. I've never seen one poster from them that featured their Ministry Mare."

As we passed, I found myself thinking of the two mares whose Ministries never boasted their image, Applejack and Rarity. One because her Ministry didn't want to give her the honor, and the other because she did not wish to take the honor for herself.

SteelHooves, whose love for Applejack had never faltered, had a statuette of the mare ("Be Strong!") in his shack. I suspected that was the best image of Applejack they would find.

* * *

Instinctively, I had assumed SteelHooves would have taken the Overmare's Office. But as our escorts turned us into the security station, I remembered that Stable Twenty-Nine didn't *have* an Overmare's Office. A ghostly touch of that sense of wrongness brushed the back of my mind.

SteelHooves was pacing the room, speaking to a brown mare with a cropped yellow mane whom I quickly gleaned was (ex?) Star Paladin Crossroads. She wasn't wearing Steel Rangers armor, painted or otherwise. But then, they had to take it off sometime didn't they? Except SteelHooves, of course.

They're calling him Elder now, I thought bemusedly as I watched our former companion.

"…can't send a full detachment with him," SteelHooves was arguing. "That would leave Stable Twenty-Nine dangerously low on defenders." I did not yet know what this was about, but I recognized the dire necessity for the Outcasts to keep Stable Twenty-Nine. If the Steel Rangers took the Stable, then all the Outcasts drawn here for refuge would be galloping into a trap.

"And if we send only a small honor guard, it invites an attack," Crossroads retorted evenly. "We can't ask our ponies to walk into that kind of danger with insufficient numbers."

SteelHooves disagreed. "They're Applejack's Rangers. Galloping into danger for the sake of another is exactly what we should expect from them, and what they should expect of themselves."

"Any one of us should be willing to rush to the aid of the innocent without thought for ourselves. But there are no innocents here to be saved. This is a prisoner transfer in hostile territory. This is different," Crossroads insisted, "And you know that."

The Outcasts flanking us stood silently and at attention. I felt I should clear my throat. To announce our presence. Not out of impatience but to make sure the two leaders of this new faction were fully aware their discussion was not private. I didn't feel like I was politely waiting; I felt like I was eavesdropping.

"If the Steel Rangers open fire on our paladins, then they risk catching their own Elder in the crossfire," SteelHooves countered, but then seemed to have second thoughts about his argument. "Actually, if the Steel Rangers were to kill Elder Cottage Cheese in an attack, that might actually be better for us in the long run. Letting him go free is only going to borrow future trouble and death for the Outcasts."

Crossroads sighed and smiled reasonably, "True, but we shouldn't allow ourselves to think that way. Remember, we're the good ponies." SteelHooves nickered in response.

"Howdy y'all," Calamity called out, "Who ya takin' where now?"

I caught Velvet purr something under her breath. Our escorts bristled a bit at the audacity of Calamity's interruption, but as SteelHooves and Crossroads turned to face us, Crossroads gave us a smile. "And you must be Calamity, Velvet Remedy, 'That Zebra' and, of course, Littlepip."

For a moment, I glowered at SteelHooves. *That zebra.* Really? But then Xenith spoke – "Your reputation spreads, little one." – and my indignation deflated. There was, after all, a touch of fair turnabout at play. I didn't believe for a moment that was why SteelHooves referred to Xenith that way. But if I spoke up, he could argue it was, and I could not win that argument.

Velvet Remedy stepped forward and dipped her head in greeting. "We are. And our zebra companion's name is Xenith. We are pleased to finally meet you, Crossroads."

SteelHooves seemed to look us over in lieu of a more formal or familiar reunion, then told Calamity, "Elder Cottage Cheese of the Manehattan Steel Rangers is currently under… house arrest. We have negotiated an agreement to return him to the Steel Rangers at Bucklyn Cross."

"Bucklyn Cross?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Why don't they jus' come here t' get 'im?" Calamity wondered.

Crossroads frowned. "For the same reasons, I suspect, that we are disputing how many of our own to commit to the delivery. Elder Cottage Cheese devoted most of his knights and paladins to the assaults on Stables Two and Twenty-Nine. The forces holding Bucklyn Cross are depleted enough to explain their refusal to divide their forces."

"Then ya hardly need t' worry 'bout them attackin' here."

"Them, no." SteelHooves paced. "Others, yes. We can expect a counter-strike by forces sent from Fillydelphia at any time. Their Elder was killed in Stable Two. They will not forgive that. And they may receive reinforcements from other contingents."

Crossroads shook her head. "Hoofington is still dark. And Trottingham is such a mess that the Elder there will be hard-pressed to devote forces to anyplace else…"

"Unless the Steel Rangers abandon Trottingham entirely," SteelHooves pointed out.

"At this point, that might be their best strategic option. But even if they left now, it would be difficult for them to rally with the Fillydelphia forces in enough time to attack before our ponies have returned."

"Hard, but not impossible."

Calamity whinnied, whispering to Velvet, "Ah almost wanna tell 'em t' get a room." I shook my head. "But, y'know, this would be it."

One of the security intercoms let out a burst of static, followed by a stallion's voice. "Elder SteelHooves, sir. My apologies for the interruption, but Elder Cottage Cheese is demanding his medical chair."

In the background, I could hear the grumpy yet cultured voice of a very elderly stallion. "…still an Elder, and you traitors will show proper respect. I will *not* be hauled back to my citadel in that capsule like a piece of luggage. I will return with my head held high."

"Medical chair?" I asked.

SteelHooves groaned. Crossroads trotted to the intercom switchboard, glancing briefly at the map of lights above to determine which button she needed to press to speak back to them. Velvet Remedy whinnied softly. "Oh, Pip."

I wasn't sure why she had said that at first. But when I noticed which light was blinking on the map, I realized they were using the PipBuck Technician's stall in the maintenance wing as a jail.

I stared as the brown mare found her button, the pony in my head trying to decide how I should feel about that. I dispassionately settled on, "Makes sense."

"Elder Cottage, it's raining," Crossroads nickered politely into the intercom. "You could catch a cold. Which you know would probably kill you. Your life support capsule is the only way we can ensure you will survive the journey."

"You traitorous lot have already killed me," the Elder retorted. "The Crusader Maneframe in this Stable was my last hope, and you have ripped that from me. Whether the finishing draught be from sword, drizzle or cup of poison, I will face my end with dignity."

Crossroads took her hoof off the intercom, looking at SteelHooves with an expression of concern.

SteelHooves marched over, accessed a terminal, then pushed Crossroads out of the way as he pushed the intercom button. "Elder Cottage Cheese," his voice rumbled into the intercom. "This is SteelHooves. This conversation is now being recorded. Please state your request again."

"Request," the Elder responded with irritated civility. "Yes. I require that my medical chair be brought here at once, and that your knights here assist me in transferring to it. I will return to Bucklyn Cross as a pony, not a parcel."

Crossroads shook her head. "We can't. Chances are he'll die."

SteelHooves pressed the button again. "You have been informed of the risk this poses to your health. If you refuse to travel in a life support chamber, you could expire. Is that what you want?"

"Damn you, SteelHooves, yes, now bring me my Goddess-damned chair."

SteelHooves looked back at Crossroads and gave a grunt of satisfaction. Hitting another button, "Will somepony please bring Elder Cottage Cheese his Goddess-damned medical chair."

"SteelHooves!" Crossroads gasped.

But our armor-entombed companion had made his decision. "He is an Elder. He has the right and the authority to make his own decisions."

The familiar voice of Knight Strawberry Lemonade burst from the intercom. "I'm on it!"

Star Paladin Crossroads looked grimly displeased with her new Elder's decision. "Honestly, I don't think the assisted suicide of an enemy Elder is the best stone we could have laid in our movement's foundation." More tenderly, "Do you believe Applejack would have approved?"

I could feel SteelHooves' glower radiating from behind his visor. His response was slow in coming. "I don't know. This is not the sort of decision she would ever have wanted to make. But there will be many such difficult decisions over the next several months, and the survival of our faction has to take priority." He added solemnly, "Applejack would want us to help the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland however we could. And we can't do that if we're crushed before we can get our hooves under us."

⁂

"Littlepip, what brings you here?" SteelHooves asked once his discussion with Crossroads had ended and a few other interruptions had been attended to. "I promised I would rejoin you, but as you can see, I have my hooves full."

"We need your advice," I told him. "We have to go into the Canterlot Ruins. We need to know what to expect. And how best to survive."

Crossroads gasped. "You're… going where? Why?"

SteelHooves was taken aback. "Do you have a deathwish, Littlepip? It's not enough to throw yourself against raiders? Why are you driven to constantly find new and more extreme ways to punish yourself, risking your life and often the lives of those who follow you?"

That hurt. "I'd do this alone if I could. But we have to get into the Ministry of Awesome in Canterlot, and I can't do that by myself."

"Eyeah," Calamity stomped. "We appreciate yer not wantin' t' put us in danger, Li'lpip, but ya c'n just cut that crap right now. Ya ain't pullin' another one of yer solo missions." Fillydelphia was still fresh on everypony's mind.

"How bad is what we're trotting into?" Velvet Remedy asked.

SteelHooves gave a low nicker. "Bad. Not like it used to be, but still bad. At least, am I correct that you know where you want to go and what you want to do? The Canterlot Ruins is not a place for sightseeing."

I nodded. "We have two objectives. Rarity's office in the Ministry of Image, and the secure vault in the Ministry of Awesome."

SteelHooves nodded. "Good. You have that in your favor then. Once you enter the ruins, do not let yourself get distracted." His visor turned to stare at each of us in turn, ending with Calamity.

"Why…?" I asked, concerned that SteelHooves seemed to expect us to have trouble with that. "Are there ponies still alive in the ruins who need our help?"

"No." SteelHooves' tone was final. "There is nopony in Canterlot who would meet your definition of alive. And nopony who is looking for rescue."

"Well that's ominous," Velvet Remedy whinnied.

Xenith surprised me, saying "All those with the minds to leave Canterlot have long since fled. Those who remain are Canterlot ghouls. But not the manner of ghouls that have sound minds. These are empty shells filled with necromantic poison, retracing the last steps of their obliterated lives. Zombies performing rote tasks over and over because that is all they can remember to do." The zebra frowned deeply. "Other than attack. That is the one thing they all seem capable of. And they will move to slaughter any living thing whose presence they sense. Anything that is not one of them."

"Canterlot zombies?" Velvet intoned. "Lovely."

"Your biggest threat is the Pink Cloud," SteelHooves informed us. "It seeps into everything. Corrupting, decaying, killing all it touches. Over the centuries, the cloud has thinned to a mere haze. Canterlot itself absorbed most of it like a sponge, and now it bleeds from the walls and the streets, slowly released as they decay."

I nodded. This much I had heard before.

"These days, it is possible to survive if you are fast and careful. Some ponies can even survive hours of exposure at a time. But taking that risk is foolish. Do not fall asleep. You will never wake up.

"Limit your exposure. Every second you remain outside, the Cloud is seeping into your lungs and your skin. Interiors are safer, intact buildings and tunnels, but only where the Pink Cloud has yet to penetrate. You will want to bring every healing potion you can lay your hooves on, and drink them regularly. Their healing magic can reverse the effects of the Cloud before it causes permanent damage. Do not use healing bandages. They can cause… other problems.

"There will be pockets where the Pink Cloud has settled and pooled. Avoid them if you can, dash through them with all haste if you cannot. While still only a fraction of the potency of the original Cloud, such pockets will kill you in seconds."

Velvet Remedy raised a hoof. "Other problems?"

SteelHooves sighed. "I have told you why I cannot leave my armor. You do not want to be wearing anything when you go into the Canterlot Ruins. No protective gear is a guard against the Pink Cloud, and there is a chance that anything touching your coat may fuse to your skin under prolonged or extreme exposure. Littlepip, you will want to carry everypony's weapons telekinetically. The rest of you: take hold of those weapons only when you are using them. Pack lightly, save for medical potions, as Littlepip will be floating your saddlebags."

I was tempted to tell him that weight didn't matter, but realized that there might be wisdom in having less objects floating about me to keep track of.

"Iffin there ain't ponies there t' save, why you so worried 'bout us gettin' distracted? Canterlot don't seem like the sort o' place t' poke 'round in."

"Because Littlepip is fatally curious," SteelHooves said flatly. "And you are a kleptomaniac."

"Scavenger," Calamity corrected with a flap of his wings. SteelHooves ignored him.

"The Canterlot Ruins suffered only the single strike. I heard rumors in the days after the apocalypse that after the shield fell, the zebras launched megaspells to finally obliterate the city. But if that is true, then those missiles never reached their destination. Canterlot is surprisingly well preserved, at least within those places the Pink Cloud has not touched. The city contains a wealth of treasures from the world before. Is it even possible for you two not to get distracted?"

Xenith turned to Velvet Remedy. "It would seem the task falls to us to keep our two companions safe from themselves."

"There is more," SteelHooves warned. "The Pink Cloud has seeped into everything it touched, and the decay has transformed once benign objects into lethal traps. The most noteworthy of these are the broadcasters and the sprite-bots."

"Broadcasters?" I asked. "You mean the PipBuck peripherals like the one Blackwing gave me?"

The magically-armored ghoul nodded. "They were all the rage amongst Canterlot's elite just before the end. PipBucks had become the latest fashion accessory, and the broadcasters were rare enough that having one was prestigious." SteelHooves gave a dry, humorless laugh. "Now the Pink Cloud has both weakened and decayed their signals. I cannot explain how, but the static they now emit has a necromantic component. If you find yourself within the range of their effect you must either destroy them or flee immediately. You do not wish to know how you will die if you do not."

"You've got to be kidding," I gasped. The dangers of the Canterlot Ruins had galloped past deadly and into outright insane. How was I going to get everypony through this alive?

"I wish that I was," SteelHooves grumbled. "If you are going there, then I should accompany you. You will need more than advice. You will need a guide. Somepony who knows the streets and can get you where you need to be swiftly."

I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. "That means… a lot. Thank you. We really need you."

"We miss you too," Velvet Remedy purred. SteelHooves stomped and nickered.

"And maybe we can help you in return," I offered. "You don't need to commit any of your Outcasts to delivering Elder Cottage Cheese to… where was it?"

"Bucklyn Cross," Calamity answered with a grin. "Li'lpip's right. We got me an' we got the *Sky Bandit.* We c'n make the trip ourselves in half a day."

Crossroads, who had remained mostly silent during our reunion, spoke up. "That is a splendid idea. But as much as we appreciate your offer, we couldn't have you do it alone. There will need to be representatives of Applejack's Rangers present for the exchange."

SteelHooves seemed to consider this. "No. There only needs to be one, so long as that representative is appropriately high ranking…"

Was it my imagination, or did he sound ever so slightly happy?

"…I shall go."

* * *

SteelHooves was with us again. The little pony in my head gave a small squee. We were together once more.

The door to the security station slid open, and I stepped out into the hall, SteelHooves close to my side. Alarms went off everywhere.

"W-wha…?" I stumbled, looking around.

"We're under attack!" SteelHooves spun on his hooves and pushed back into the security station. "Star Paladin Crossroads report!"

"I-I don't know, sir," Crossroads said, zipping between monitors and panels of flashing lights. "Perimeter is secure. No hostile contact at the entrance." The Outcast Star Paladin paused. "Oh damn. The attack came from inside. I'm reading explosions in the maintenance wing."

"Cottage!" SteelHooves growled. He threw himself to the intercom switchboard. "Ponies, report. What's going on down there?"

No answer.

"Cross, bring up the tags of every pony in Stable Twenty-Nine. And tell me we have the tag for Cottage's damn chair."

My friends and I had re-entered the security station and stood watching as a glowing map of the Stable began to light up with tag markers. I knew this procedure although I had never witnessed it before. All PipBucks had a tag that allowed their wearer to be located; this was how the Overmare had intended to find Velvet Remedy, and why Velvet had tricked me into removing her PipBuck. Steel Ranger armor was built with nearly the same technology. It made sense that they would have similar tracking devices. But what about everypony not wearing their armor, like Crossroads?

The Stable map was flooded with tags now. But two stood out. Because two were in a section of the Stable that, according to the map, didn't exist – the empty space where the Overmare's Office was supposed to be.

One of those two tags flashed red. "That's the Elder's chair," Cross stated. "Where…?"

I knew. "The Crusader Maneframe." I didn't know how he managed to get inside a room that not even Shadowhorn had known how to access. But then, I knew I shouldn't be surprised. Elder Cottage Cheese had clearly been in tight communication with Elder Blueberry Sabre. And that Elder's citadel had been in the headquarters of Stable-Tec itself. They had full schematics of all the Stables. It would be easy for them to know things about each Stable that the residents themselves did not.

"What the hell is he tryin' t' do?" Calamity neighed. "He don't have that book y'all been fussin' 'bout, does he? Uploadin' himself inta that machine ain't gonna save him."

"No," SteelHooves replied, "Cottage keeps sending Rangers into the Canterlot Ruins after that thing, but none of them have ever returned. However, I'm not sure he cares at this point."

"Even if it won't be him," Crossroads suggested, "He may still view it as a sort of living legacy."

The intercom burst with static. "Elder… SteelHooves…" a pony's voice breathed. "Elder Cottage… has escaped."

"I can see that," SteelHooves retorted. "How?"

"His chair… lockbox held… matrix-disruption grenades."

SteelHooves stomped. "Didn't anypony check the chair for weapons before giving it to the damn enemy?"

"Sir… it was… an Elder's private… lockbox," came the reply. "And… it was locked."

Crossroads whinnied. "You can't expect them to just abandon the respect that had been ingrained in them for decades. *I* would have had a hard time breaking into the Elder's private possessions."

"This world needs more Littlepips," SteelHooves groused.

Velvet Remedy piped up, looking at the map. "Who's in there with him?"

Star Paladin Crossroads turned to a terminal and scanned it. Looking back to us, the brown-coated mare replied, "Knight Strawberry Lemonade."

SteelHooves reared. Crossroads continued to scan the terminal. "Her armor's spell matrix has crashed. She's paralyzed."

"He has a hostage."

⁂

I crouched against the wall between the security station and the two V.I.P. rooms (once belonging to Shadowhorn and Vinyl Scratch, I recalled). A security panel lay next to my hooves. I had my PipBuck plugged into the junction terminal hidden behind it.

On my PipBuck, I could see into the room from a camera whose visuals were only available to somepony connected into this junction. Not even the security station had access to it. I saw the Crusader Maneframe – a giant pillar with arms that reached out to smaller maneframes along the walls like spokes from a wheel. I could see Knight Strawberry Lemonade lying immobilized in her dead armor. Her helmet was off, revealing a very cute, youthful mare. Her coat was pink, her mane a gentle yellow. Her palette struck me as a reversal of Fluttershy's although her mane was cropped very short, better for one who constantly wears a metal helmet.

She was glowering at the ancient, wrinkled pony with a sickly oatmeal coat sitting in a high-tech wheelchair. According to SteelHooves, the chair had been "reclaimed" by the Elder from a crumbling Ministry of Peace hospital, along with several egg-shaped life support chambers and a variety of other advanced medical gear. Tubes continuously fed the decrepit body of the Elder, a body kept alive only by extremes of medical science and a tenacious force of will.

The Elder was fussing with a helmet covered in gems and lights attached to what I could safely assume was the Crusader Maneframe's brain transfer-mapping unit. The unit was meant to be worn on the head of a pony resting in a gel tank beneath it. Cottage was being delayed by an inability to physically move himself from the chair to the tank, so he was unfastening the helmet.

As I watched, he floated it free. The helmet levitated through the air towards his head, then stopped as it reached the length of several vital cables that still bound it to the rest of the machine. The Elder started jockeying his chair, trying to move close enough for his head to reach the helmet.

It occurred to me suddenly that Elder Cottage Cheese was the first… no, second unicorn I had seen amongst the Steel Rangers. Their helmets weren't exactly designed for horns. I wondered if he had cut his horn off to wear their armor. It would have certainly been a sign of dedication to the Steel Rangers. But, if so, then the horn had re-grown, and I hadn't thought that could happen. If so, it was a bright spot of news for Silver Bell's future.

Or, I realized, he may have just moved up through the ranks of non-armored Steel Rangers. They did, after all, have unicorns like the one whose body I found in Old Olneigh. Scribes, I think they were called. Researchers.

I knew SteelHooves was working to find a way into the room. Cottage would certainly try to use Strawberry Lemonade as a hostage. But knowing SteelHooves, that wouldn't stop him. Fortunately, I had another idea.

"Hello, Elder Cottage Cheese," I said, speaking into the terminal. "I'm Littlepip. I've hacked into the room to beg you not to do this."

The Elder frowned but ignored me, trying to nudge his chair into a better position next to the tank.

"Stop him!" Strawberry Lemonade cried out. "Do whatever you have to do. Gas the room."

"Shut up," the Elder said almost amiably. Then, addressing me, he announced, "Any attempts to interfere will cost this young traitor her life."

"I'm not a damsel in distress," the young knight bit back. "I am a knight of Applejack Ranger's. And I won't be your leverage. I'd self destruct if I could to stop you."

First I felt a warm pride stretching out towards Strawberry Lemonade. You tell him, girl! Then I blinked. Nothing I'd seen had ever suggested that Steel Ranger armor could do that. But then, I supposed it would depend on the payload in their battle saddles.

"But you can do nothing," the Elder replied coolly. "So cease your prattling."

"This won't save you," I told Cottage through the terminal, trying to be reasonable. "You have to know that. The mind you create inside the Crusader won't actually be you."

"I am well aware of that," the Elder replied. "I'm not an ignorant tribal." He tilted and strained his neck, attempting to get the helmet to reach. He was getting close, but there were still several inches of space between the helmet and the few remaining wisps of his mane.

"Then why?" I asked plaintively as my PipBuck scanned the junction terminal.

"My body and soul may not survive, but my mind will go on. This rebellion will fail, and when the Steel Rangers reclaim this place, my intellect will be here to guide them into the future."

"What future?" I countered. "All you ponies do is raid and horde technology. While other ponies are building a new world, you are hiding in your citadels. How much guidance does that take?"

"You are an ignorant insect," he grunted in annoyance as he shifted painfully in his chair. "You cannot be expected to understand."

"Then educate me," I offered, my voice a little more curt than I would have liked.

"Educate yourself," he replied. "Look around you, if you have the eyes and the wits to comprehend your surroundings. These tribals have no future. What you see as progress is just brief distraction along their march to destruction. More ponies choose to be raiders and bandits and slavers than seem to flock to the dying embers of civilization. Only Red Eye has any real ambition towards creating a new world, and you have seen the depths of depravity he has fallen to in his attempts to manifest his vision."

"At least Red Eye is actually *doing* something."

"All he is doing is stabbing a poisoned dagger through the heart of ponykind." Cottage shifted further, straining his neck in a way that caused him to quiver and grit his teeth in pain. But he managed to get the helmet onto his head. "Do you truly think any society that evolves from the pits of misery he has created can be anything other than a degenerate and vicious abomination?"

I cringed, fearing he might be right. "But what about the Steel Rangers? What possible good could come out of the murderous thugs you have cultured?"

"We do not pretend that we are building a society now," Elder Cottage Cheese informed me. "We are just gathering what is necessary for those who will. The Steel Rangers will wait out this plague. And when you debased creatures who have no right to call yourselves ponies have finally extinguished each other, generations from now, the Steel Rangers will emerge into a world clean of you. We will rise like a phoenix from the ashes. Not the twisted blasphemy of a balefire phoenix, but a pure and true one, bringing with us all the glory and knowledge of the past to create a new world of proper ponies."

"And you will guide them."

"Yes." He grunted, starting up the scans for the mental transfer-mapping.

"You will rule them?"

"Indeed."

"And what will keep you from becoming a tyrant? For that matter, what will keep you from making the same mistakes as old Equestria? All you are preserving is the knowledge and science that they had when they fell. Nothing you are saving will prevent ponies from falling again."

The device began to hum. The gems on the helmet began to glow. The lights began to flash.

"I will," the Elder claimed confidently. "My intellect. My judgment. Unfettered by emotion and the selfish desires that have brought ruin to the ponies of past and present. It is, in retrospect, better that I never did acquire that Book. I will be wiser this way."

"You would be heartless," I mused sadly. "Lacking in compassion. Lacking in any of the virtues that make ponies worthy of saving. It is the virtues of our hearts that make us something good. That can make us something great."

The Elder started with alarm. "Wait. What are you doing?"

"Stopping you," I told him gently. "The vice-president of Stable-Tec gave Shadowhorn the codes to shut down this Crusader completely if it should ever pose a threat. I should have used them before. I'm doing so now."

"NO!"

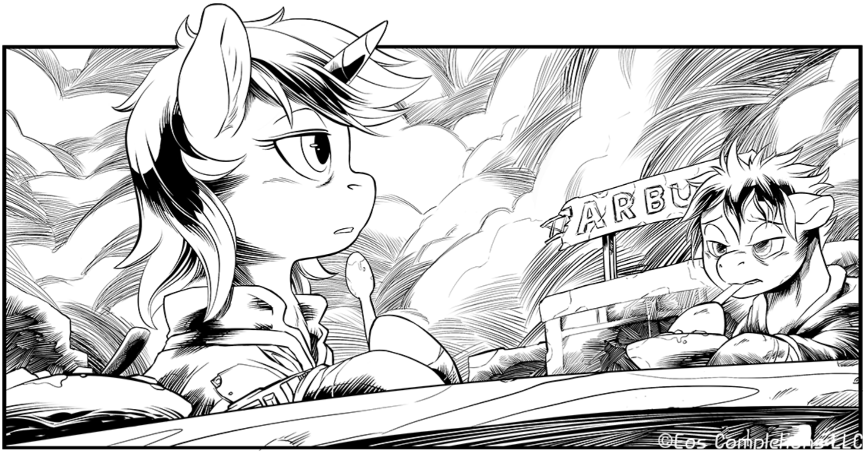
"I'm truly sorry. Mister Cottage. But there is no place in this wasteland for a cold, ever-living despot who would rule this world through soulless vision."

I sent the code. The lights of Stable Twenty-Nine went dark.

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Edge of Night



"Aaaaallrighty. What do you say we get on out of Creepytown…?"

Darkness.

Everything had gone black. Even the junction terminal was completely dead. Well, fuck.

Okay, not entirely unexpected. The message left for Shadowhorn by Scootaloo warned that shutting down the Crusader Maneframe would shut off all the automated systems. And since the Crusader Maneframe ran virtually everything, that meant all the systems were automated.

I had stopped Elder Cottage Cheese. I just hoped I hadn't cost the Outcasts their base in the process.

I turned on the lamp of my PipBuck. Its light seemed somehow ghostly in the reigning quiet. Checking my PipBuck's automap, I was pleased to find that interfacing with the junction had revealed the entrance into the Crusader Maneframe's secure room. I pushed myself up and started towards the entrance. With speed, I could get there and reboot the spell matrix in Strawberry Lemonade's power armor before SteelHooves finished cutting his way in.

I fought a niggling sense of panic. If I just broke the Stable, I was going to be in *so* much trouble.

The quiet didn't last long. Shouts echoed down the halls. As I trotted into the atrium, I passed the two knights I had overheard talking earlier. They were galloping towards the security station, the spotlights on their helmets cutting swaths of illumination, one of them still pulling a trash bin behind her.

Emergency lights came on throughout the Stable, bathing the halls with pale orange. I exhaled in relief. Thank you, Apple Bloom, for thinking of everything!

"Hello, residents of Stable Twenty-Nine,"

A sweet-sounding mare's voice called out over the Stable loudspeakers.

> *"My name is Sweetie Belle, and I am… was one of the founding ponies of Stable-Tec…"*

I cast a look at one of the speakers as I passed by. What was this?

> *"If you are hearing this, it means that the Crusader Maneframe that has been running Stable Twenty-Nine since it was sealed was shut down moments ago because it posed a threat to the ponies under its care."*

Sweetie Belle's voice was calming. I slowed to a walk.

> *"Emergency subsystems have been activated to take care of vital life-sustaining and security-related systems,"* the voice of Sweetie Belle informed us. *"Unfortunately, these subsystems have a limited lifespan and will only function for five years."*

For ponies trapped in a Stable beneath an irradiated hellscape, five years would have been a major problem. For us, it was virtually a gift from heaven.

> *"I'm afraid you will have to figure out what to do from here on your own. But don't panic. You are good ponies, and you can do more than you think if you just put your minds to it. I know you will do just fine.*
>
> *"Good luck, my little ponies."*

⁂

I rounded the corner into the maintenance wing only to see a machine gun turret lowering out of a sliding ceiling panel, silhouetted hellishly by the orange emergency light behind it. I slid to a stop, eyeing the turret. Calamity had shut down all the security turrets last time we were here. But the subsystems must have brought them back online. Still, without the Crusader trying to wipe out the Stable's population, they shouldn't be hostile, right?

The turret clicked, beeped, and spun towards me.

BRAT-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!

I dove back around the corner as bullets sparked off the walls. What the fuck?

A new automated voice came over the speakers, this time an anonymous mare.

> *"Crusader Maneframe emergency shutdown successful. Security subsystem attempting to discern the nature of the emergency and provide assistance."*

I heard more gunfire from deeper in the Stable.

> *"Analysis: dead water talisman. Celestia-Tier Emergency. Contacting nearest Stable-Tec supply house for delivery of replacement talisman… Contact failed. Supply house not responding or no longer exists. Attempting to contact secondary supply house… Contact failed. Secondary supply house unreachable."*

I floated out Little Macintosh and checked the load.

> *"Analysis: hostile takeover. Luna-Tier Emergency. Anti-intruder measures have been engaged. All residents of Stable should retreat to one of the safe rooms until threat has passed."*

I slid into S.A.T.S. as I jumped back into the hall. My targeting spell locked onto the turret, and I fired four shots into its hull. The turret exploded in a shower of sparks with the third hit.

I broke into a gallop, sure that the Crusader Maneframe was in a "safe room". I wanted to get there and get Strawberry Lemonade back up on her hooves before the room sealed off. Fortunately, the secret entrance that Cottage had used was on the maintenance level, just around the next…

I skidded to a halt as I turned the next corner and found myself facing two more sentry guns. I scrambled back the way I came as bullets tore at the air behind me.

> *"Identifying resident locations via PipBuck tags. Number of Stable Twenty-Nine residents: zero,"* the voice said dispassionately. *"Number of Stable Twenty-Nine residents still outside of safe rooms: zero. Safe rooms sealing now."*

Crap!

I didn't have time to reload Little Macintosh. Instead, I drew out both the zebra rifle and the sniper rifle. I hoped my skills in marksmanship had improved enough to target multiple stationary targets on my own. S.A.T.S. was not designed to aid with multi-weapon telekinesis, especially with such different weapons.

I spun around the corner, aiming as swiftly as I could. The hall filled with bullets flying in each direction. I felt the impacts as several shots hit my armor but did not penetrate. I felt a burning graze on my left cheek, and a much more serious pain as a bullet punctured my right hindleg.

The sniper rifle fired twice, punching holes through the hull plating of the first turret. The zebra rifle tore at the second one as it set the turret on fire. The turret exploded, taking its wounded twin out with it.

I wobbled, pain lancing up my hindleg. I wasn't going to make it now, not when I couldn't run.

"Safe rooms sealed," the mare's voice announced, informing me that it wouldn't have mattered anyway. There had never been enough time. "Deploying neurotoxin gas."

Wait, what?

I remembered Knight Strawberry Lemonade calling for me to take out Cottage by gassing the room, but I didn't realize that was actually possible. *But Stables tend to be dangerous,* Stern had warned us in Fillydelphia. *They often have their own security or their own… unique dangers.*

I turned frantically, looking around. I needed to get out of the hall. But where could I go that would be safe? The safe rooms were already sealed. I suddenly felt very tired.

Having no better choice, I started hobbling back down the maintenance wing. I wanted to get to the PipBuck Technician's stall. There was no logic behind the choice. It just felt like the best place for me to be. I probably wasn't thinking straight. I felt so tired.

Tired… and heavy.

I wondered what kind of gas was going to be released. Would I hear it? Would I be able to smell it? Would it burn my eyes and lungs? So far, there was nothing, not even a haziness to the air. A flutter of hope moved in my heart. Maybe, after two hundred years, the intruder counter-measures no longer worked. Maybe there was no gas. The idea made me feel better, but also a little dizzy.

Dizzy. And tired. And heavy…

Oh no…

And then I was falling back in the darkness again. I didn't even feel my body hit the floor.

* * *

I woke up in the Stable Twenty-Nine Clinic. Not my favorite room in any Stable, and particularly not in this one.

"Welcome back, Littlepip," SteelHooves' deep voice rumbled. "We're situated to leave for Bucklyn Cross whenever you are."

My mouth felt dry and cottony. My voice rasped as I asked, "Why am I not dead?" I could feel a throbbing pain in my right hindleg, beneath the compressive wrap of healing bandages.

"The toxin was designed to incapacitate, not kill." The voice was Velvet Remedy's, but I barely recognized it. She sounded as bad as I did. "Either Stable-Tec didn't want to trust the threat analysis of their subsystem with something that could wipe out the Stable… or they expected the inhabitants to want prisoners." She sounded like she was quickly reaching the same level of dislike for Stables that I had. "I can't believe they gassed the Clinic."

"Well," I grunted, unsurprised that Velvet Remedy's response to the power shutdown had been to push her way to the Clinic – the place ponies would come to for help. "Maybe they just gassed the Atrium. After all, there is that big hole where the window used to be."

I pushed myself upright. A nauseating wave of dizziness nearly knocked me off the gurney I had been laying on. "unnngh." I looked to Velvet Remedy. "Are you okay?"

"I won't be singing again for a few days," Velvet said dourly. She looked a little haggard, but thankfully uninjured. "But otherwise, yes. Everypony is fine." She added, "And zebra."

"And the Rangers?"

"Environmentally sealed armor with rebreathers," SteelHooves said, sounding just a touch proud of Applejack's technology. "Gas never got us. Well, those of us in our suits, that is."

"Cross?" I asked, my throat hurting. "Strawberry?"

"Both fine. They were in Stable safe rooms. I rebooted Knight Strawberry Lemonades' armor myself."

I nodded. Made sense security would qualify. Or at least the armory. And Star Paladin Crossroads would have had plenty of time to step into it before it sealed. From the tone of SteelHooves' voice, I guessed that Strawberry Lemonade had shown more thanks than he was comfortable with. I wished I could have seen it.

"Was anypony… shot?"

"Well, you were," Velvet Remedy rasped snarkily. Then, with a more somber tone, "Yes. A few others. Mercifully, no fatalities, but there are some ponies here who won't be walking around again for a few weeks. In one case, I'm afraid, the damage was permanent."

The weight of the damage I had caused pushed me back down onto the gurney. I stared at the ceiling, wondering how many ponies had been hurt and how long they would be in pain.

"Good work with Cottage," SteelHooves told me although I certainly didn't feel like I deserved any congratulations. "The Elder is still alive, but comatose. His fault, not yours.

We have him in his life-support pod, ready for delivery."

"Comatose…" I whispered as a dull pain settled over me that had nothing to do with my injuries. "Will he ever…?"

"Probably not," SteelHooves replied bluntly. He made it sound like a good thing.

* * *

"I… I'm sorry."

A lump caught in my throat as I stared up to a knight stallion laying on a gurney. He'd been shot up pretty badly by one of the suddenly-active turrets in the men's dormitory. He hadn't been in his armor; he'd been off-shift and had curled up to sleep… only to wake up as bullets tore into his back, screaming in pain as two of his fellow Rangers leapt to destroy the turret.

I imagined myself in his place, and I wondered if he'd ever be able to sleep easily again.

"Fer what?" the stallion asked bitterly. "Hey, ain't yer fault. Ah blame Cottage, if anypony."

I didn't. Blinking back a tear, I put a hoof on his shoulder. "Is there… anything I can do?"

"Think you've done enough," he retorted, then looked apologetic as I winced.

I nodded and turned to go.

Calamity and Xenith were trotting down the hallway towards me. I stopped in shock as I saw Xenith's horn. For a moment, I thought the zebra had been transformed into a unicorn… badly. But I quickly saw the straps holding the metal plate to her forehead, the curving, wicked horn jutting out of it. I chuckled despite my melancholy.

"So, you finally got a chance to build the hellhound helmet, I see," I said to Calamity as the rust-coated pegasus paused to tip open a trash bin with a wing. I recognized now the product of the schematics we had discovered at Hippocampus Energy Plant #12. Several hellhound claws were wonderglued together to form the exceptionally lethal horn.

"Ayep!" Calamity said proudly as he fished an old pack of cigarettes out of the trash. Xenith looked mildly less thrilled.

"Using such a weapon is not proper Fallen Caesar Style," she commented, her exotic voice taking a dour tone. "But the pegasus has argued well that hooves alone are no match for an alicorn's shield."

I blinked. "Are we… expecting more trouble with the alicorns?" I asked hesitantly. I seemed to remember a warning about alicorns in the Canterlot Ruins. "I thought we were on a mission from the Goddess? Surely, they'd let us pass."

Slipping the cigarette pack into his saddlebags, Calamity frowned with a look of grim discomfort. "Well… Let's jus' say we just ain't takin' any chances."

* * *

The storm from the night before had given way to a light drizzle as Calamity wove the *Sky Bandit* between the dark, skeletal husks that had once been Manehattan's skyscrapers. We were heading to Bucklyn Cross in a part of the city that I had not yet seen.

Velvet Remedy stirred, coming out of the Fluttershy orb for what was the second time since we left Stable Twenty-Nine this morning. I looked away, not meeting the gaze coming from SteelHooves' helmet. Everypony deserved their little retreats.

"There's something I don't understand," Velvet Remedy admitted, looking to me as she put the memory orb away. Her voice was still raspy, but not as bad as it was a few hours ago.

I wasn't in the mood for conversation. At my insistence, I had been led around to all the Outcasts who had been hurt when the security systems activated. I apologized to each one. Most were polite, and some even thanked me for dealing with Cottage and possibly revealing two locations for backup water talismans to boot. Only one of them snapped at me over it. More should have.

"Littlepip, you said that Red Eye talked about controlling the sun, the moon and the weather. But not even the Goddess Celestia was able to control the weather all across Equestria. Does he really expect that mimicking what Trixie has become will make him more powerful than Celestia?"

I shrugged, not feeling like speaking. And honestly, I really had no idea.

Velvet Remedy shook her head. "For that matter, why focus on the sun and the moon? Either Celestia and Luna are up there somewhere, guiding them like They always have…" Velvet glanced towards Calamity, her eyes meeting with his as he looked back over his shoulder at the conversation. "…or Calamity is right, the Goddesses are simply dead, the sun and moon are doing just fine on their own."

Which would mean that the Goddesses were never really needed in the first place.

"Sure, being their guide would be a status symbol," Velvet said. "But Red Eye seems… practical. Why turn himself into… something like her to do something that doesn't need to be done?"

Calamity veered away from the blackened husk of a building as dozens of pigeons burst out. I slipped off my bench as the passenger wagon tilted, thumping my right hindleg hard enough to bring tears to my eyes. Pyrelight leapt from Velvet's side, soaring out of one of the windows into the open air, giving chase.

Blinking, I considered crawling back onto the bench. The bench was more comfortable but laying on it risked another spill. I decided to just stay on the floor.

"Is it not obvious," Xenith said. "He wishes to be worshipped like a God. How better to become one than to take on the role of your Goddesses?"

I shook my head. "I don't think that's it." Red Eye had talked as if he was removing himself from the equation. Like doing this was akin to dying. He was many things, but not a megalomaniac.

"Ya'll are makin' an assumption that jus' ain't so," Calamity called back.

We all turned towards him. "And what would that assumption be?" Velvet asked in a voice that would have been a purr if not for the aftereffects of the gas.

"Y'all talk like the sun an' the moon are doin' what they're s'posed to," Calamity replied, swooping beneath a crumbling and dangerously canted walkway that stretched between two tilting towers. Several bloodwings were nesting underneath. "Way Ah heard it, Celestia would raise the sun at the beginnin' o' day, then lower it at night. Luna would bring out the moon, then put it away at dawn. That was s'posed t' be the order o' things, right?"

"Well, yes," Velvet Remedy replied. "Of course. But clearly that's still happening. It was night before, it is day now, and it will be night again, just like clockwork."

"Oh it's happenin', but it ain't nothin' like clockwork. Ah can't tell ya how many times when Ah was growin' up that Ah saw the sun an' the moon in the sky *at the same time.*"

Velvet and Xenith gasped. I reeled. The very notion was… like something out of a doomsday prophecy. The sun and the moon never shared the sky. It was *unnatural. Blasphemous.*

"Usually, it was in the early mornin', like they couldn't decide which was s'posed t' be out. They've gone wild, Ah reckon. Like the weather." Calamity began a graceful turn that tilted the *Sky Bandit,* giving us all a view of the slate-blue expanse of the ocean beyond Manehattan's harbor. I could see a few lights shining from the Pony of Friendship on her little island out in the bay. The storm clouds darkened as they stretched out across the sea, and the horizon was obscured by the heavy grey of rain.

"Don't happen that often, but happens enough that no pegasus ever forgets that there ain't nopony guidin' 'em anymore." Calamity snorted, "An' it ain't always in the mornin'. Once, middle o' the day, 'bout a generation after the war, the sun an' the moon weren't only both in the sky at the same time, they were in the same spot! It was like they collided or somethin'."

I was in shock, horrified by what Calamity was describing. The pony in my head tried to come up with an epitaph, but no lewd reference to the Goddesses could match the profanity of that event.

"Ah wasn't there, o course," Calamity told us. "But Ah've seen pictures. Sun turned inta a big black disk pourin' out reddish light like it was the end o' the world. Plenty o' pegasus folk thought it was. There was riotin'. Ponies got killed. Enclave stepped in, restored peace. Ah think that was when they really took control."

* * *

It was late evening when I first laid eyes on Bucklyn Cross.

The skyscrapers had fallen behind us, and the Manehattan Ruins had become a grey maze of crumbling structures and flattened buildings radiating out from the Manehattan Blast Zone. We could clearly see where the Balefire Bomb had gone off. What had once been Manehattan's city center had been scoured to the foundations in a huge radius. The Blast Zone was almost uniformly smooth save for odd lines where underground tunnels had channeled the blast. It glistened like glass.

Beyond the Manehattan Blast Zone, beyond miles of shattered city, a murky river cut through the land. Its shores marked the boundary between Manehattan and Bucklyn, one of Manehattan's largest suburbs. The Bucklyn Bridge had once spanned the river. It has been one of Manehattan's crowning landmarks – a massive, multi-tiered suspension bridge with huge brickwork piers that included rentable living spaces. The Bucklyn Bridge had collapsed from both ends, leaving only a single freestanding pier in the middle of the river, a stretch of roadway hanging out over the water in each direction. When viewed from the right angle, it did indeed look like a giant cross. Little rivulets of rainwater were pouring off of each end; the wind caught the water in misty sprays.

The meeting point for our exchange with the Steel Rangers was on this side of the river. So I was alarmed when Calamity flew past it, swooping out over the water. "Hang on!"

"What?" I asked, crawling up onto a bench and floating out my binoculars. I looked first downwards towards the cracked remains of a wagon hitching lot I believed was our destination. And indeed there were several Paladins looking back up through the rain at me with upturned visors. And more waiting in the ruins beyond. I spotted at least a dozen.

Were they planning to ambush us, or were they protecting themselves should we try to double-cross them? I pointed out what I'd spotted to SteelHooves.

"Make sure your guns are loaded," he replied. Then turned to Calamity. "Where are you going?"

I turned my gaze to Bucklyn Cross, noting more Steel Rangers moving between the wreckage of wagons and defensive barricades. There were multiple turrets (including several mounted on the bottom of the bridge which clearly kept it free of bloodwings), and I noted a few tank-like sentinel bots rolling about on patrol. Structures had been built between the tiers and between the columns of the pier, supplementing the living spaces already inside the pier. A line of cranes held several small boats over the edge of the bridge railing. All in all, the Steel Ranger's Manehattan citadel looked cramped but ridiculously secure.

It would take them considerable time to send reinforcements. They would have to do so by boat.

I noticed other boats in the river – small, light craft pushed over the water by huge fans. A hoof-full of them skimmed about like insects near a small settlement huddled along the shore in the dim shadow of Bucklyn Cross.

Once, in the old Equestria, the buildings had been a strip mall, apparently dominated by two competing coffee shops. The two shops had fought to out-advertise each other, cumulating in each building a giant billboard over their respective corners of the mall. The billboard for Java's Cup had collapsed, crushing through the roof of the adjacent Sunny Suds' Laundromat. The opposite billboard had suffered severe damage from smoke and age, leaving only four letters of the sign clearly legible: arbu.

The residents of Arbu had ringed the asphalt field that had once been the mall's complimentary parking with passenger and delivery wagons, using scavenged plates of scrap metal to fortify the barricade. It was a passable defense, but in comparison to the fortifications of Bucklyn Cross, the little village looked like a target.

Several of the signboards from above the strip mall's shops, including a sign for Java's Cup the size of a schoolroom chalkboard, had been cobbled together to create a gate which could be opened and closed through a system of chains and pulleys. Above, the ponies had fashioned a sign:

Arbu
Friendliest town in the wasteland!

The gate was being slowly drawn upward to allow a merchant caravan to exit from the town.

I knew what had drawn Calamity's attention even before I saw them.

The rain-soaked ponies I saw moving between the rubble, setting an ambush for the caravan, didn't look like raider ponies. They lacked the fucked-up, "scourges of ponykind" motif. No necklaces of pony bones or cutie marks of bloodied weapons. They just looked like bandits.

"Uh… Calamity? Maybe we should just scare them off?"

"So they c'n jus' attack the next caravan instead?" Calamity asked gruffly, kicking the reload bar of his battle saddle. "Plan t' go 'round 'pologizin' t' everypony they kill after we let 'em go?"

That stung. I shut up.

There were nine of them. I watched several taking aim down rifles pointed towards Arbu. One, a slate-blue unicorn mare, floated a heavy assault rifle into position. If we didn't intervene, this would be a slaughter.

Calamity lined up on the first of the bandits and opened fire. One double-shot from his battle saddle and the pony fell, missing part of his head.

The bandits all turned about, looking for where the shot had come from. Only one of them thought to look up into the sky. Calamity fired again, just as the pony pointed upwards and cried out a warning to her companions. One of Calamity's bullets tore into the bottom of her pointing hoof, wrecking her foreleg. The other hit her thick leather armor. She fell back, badly wounded.

Pyrelight swooped in front of us, diving down towards the bandit. The magnificent huntress let out a blast of green flame, setting the wounded bandit ablaze. I could hear her screams as she burned to death.

The remaining bandits, seven of them, dove for better cover, turning their weapons skyward. One black-coated earth pony with a sawed-off shotgun swung his weapon towards Pyrelight.

BLAM! The beautiful balefire phoenix let out a squawk of pain and fell from the sky, bouncing off a freestanding wall and landing in a trash bin. Velvet Remedy cried out in dismay.

"Calamity, get us down there now!" she screamed.

Dozens of bullets sparked off the *Sky Bandit,* echoing metallically. I floated up the zebra rifle and peered down the scope. The other ponies were shooting back at us, but the black stallion's shotgun didn't have the range. Instead, he was crouching behind a mailbox, looking for better cover. I brought up my targeting spell and took aim. His cover was good; it would be a tricky shot to get him…

I paused. And slipped away the zebra rifle, bringing out the sniper rifle instead. I reasoned that an armor-piercing shot would go right through the mailbox. But the real reason is that I didn't want to set these ponies on fire. It felt wrong to kill them like that.

But I was still going to kill them. Did that make me "corrupted kindness" after all?

Calamity banked, firing again. One of the bandit ponies learned the hard way that her cover was just not quite good enough. She screamed as one of the bullets clipped her in the flank, the other pinging off the concrete she was hiding behind with a shower of white dust.

"Dammit, move where Ah c'n see ya!"

SteelHooves' deep voice wryly commented, "I don't think she's looking to oblige." He moved up to one of the passenger wagon's broken windows, warning us to get back. The missile launcher built unto his battle saddle opened up. Two rockets whooshed out, the backwash of their launch filling the wagon with choking smoke. I threw myself to a window, more to breathe than to see, and watched as the missiles struck home on the bandit mare's concrete shield, blasting it apart. The mare's body was bloodily torn by chunks of blast-propelled concrete.

More shots. This time neither from the bandits nor from us. Several armed ponies were charging out of Arbu, firing pistols and rifles at the bandits. Others were moving to protect the merchant.

The remaining bandits were forced to split their attention. The slate-blue unicorn bandit turned her assault rifle towards the incoming ponies of Arbu and opened fire, spraying wildly. The townsponies dived for cover amongst the hulks of old chariots and the crumbled walls of what had once been a dentistry office. At the gate, one of the ponies knocked the merchant out of the line of fire, taking several bullets in the side. More hit the merchant's heavily-laden, two-headed cattle who mooed in fright and pain.

That broke my battle stupor. I floated the sniper rifle in front of me, peering down the scope, and sent three armor-piercing bullets through the mailbox. The black stallion toppled, laying on his side, his sides heaving with each breath as he slowly bled out.

Calamity had maneuvered us close enough in his efforts to land for Velvet that I could hear the cry of the colt who suddenly galloped out from under a pile of metal boxes. "Daddy!"

Oh no. No. Celestia rape me with a solar flare, no.

The colt ran right up to the fallen stallion, throwing himself on his dying father… and right into the line of fire.

What had I done?

Velvet Remedy's shield spell flashed up over the colt and his fallen father. I slipped my weapon away, feeling an icy numbness pass through me. They are bandits, I tried to tell myself. But I was not ready for bandits with family.

Please, I prayed to Celestia, don't let the father die. The father… I put three bullets through.

Below, a rifle shot from one of the bandits caught an Arbu mare square in the chest. She fell, coughing up blood once, twice… then never coughed again.

SteelHooves' grenade machinegun tore at my eardrums as a swath of explosions ripped through the bandits' defenses, killing two of them and sending the others scattering. Another twin-shot from Calamity felled one of the bandits as he ran, blood painting the broken wall beside him. Another took several shots from the Arbu townsponies. Most of the bullets impacted the bandit's armor with little affect, but a lucky shot pierced her eye. The shot knocked her head back, the black socket of her eye, ringed with blood, stared vacantly upwards towards us. Unbidden, the nightmarish vision of the sun and the moon sharing the sky, becoming a black disk ringed with fire, blossomed in my mind. I shuddered uncontrollably.

As the mare fell, the last bandit turned and fled into the ruins. Two of the Arbu ponies gave chase. I could tell Calamity wanted to as well, but Velvet was desperate to get to Pyrelight. The passenger wagon wobbled in the air as Calamity made his decision. Then we turned, dropping down in the nearest stretch of road.

Velvet Remedy leapt out through one of the windows before we had touched down. She too had a decision to make. Both the father and Pyrelight might already be dead.

But if either lived, it was unlikely they would live long enough for her to care for the other first. She paused, looking in the direction of one, then the other. I could see the tremble pass through her legs. With a tormented cry, she made her decision. And galloped towards Pyrelight as fast as she could.

As she ran, her horn glowed, opening one of her medical boxes. Healing bandages and potions and drugs spilled out. "Xenith, Littlepip, please help him!" she begged us at the top of her voice as she left us behind.

Telekinetically scooping up the dropped medical supplies, I ran towards the father and his colt, Xenith galloping at my side.

* * *

"You can't… have… my son…" the black stallion rasped weakly as two of the Arbu townsponies pulled the colt off of him. The boy's wet mane hung in front of his eyes, the water dripping from it mixed with his tears as he struggled to be reunited with the stallion.

"We'll take good care o' him," one of the Arbu mares promised kindly. "Treat him as one o' our own."

Xenith and I were doing what we could. But the two of us did not equal one Velvet Remedy. And seeing the extent of the damage made me think that not even she could save him without the aid of a full Clinic. Instead, the painkiller was at least dulling his pain. His last breaths were shallow. His eyes glazed and not truly seeing.

I could barely see him through the tears in my eyes.

"I… won't let…" The rest of the sentence was lost in a final exhalation.

The stallion was dead.

I stumbled away, breathing heavily, tears falling from my eyes. I'd killed him. I'd killed a colt's father.

I was having a hard time breathing. I tried to think of anything I could do to make this right. But you couldn't fix dead. There was no way I could make this up to either the father or his colt. I knew it, and it felt like it was killing me. I deserved it.

My ears caught the sound of creaking wheels and hooves clopping through puddles. I turned as a pony approached from Arbu, hitched to a wagon. She was a stout apricot unicorn with a wagon for a cutie mark and a scar just underneath it. Her coat showed signs of radiation poisoning. She waved a friendly hello that I half-returned. Her horn glowed with a soft brown light that enveloped the father and floated his body upwards and into the cart, placing the black-coated corpse on top of several other pony bodies. Arbu was collecting the dead, their own and bandits alike.

"What?" I asked weakly.

"Well, somepony's got to bury 'em," replied a green-coated Arbu mare with shockingly orange hair. I felt another shot of pain as I realized the good ponies of Arbu treated the dead of their enemies better than I tended to treat the bodies of ponies I had grown to care about. The images of Pinkie Pie's skeleton and Apple Bloom's both floated in front of my mind's eye.

I realized how utterly unworthy I was of Homage's affections. I didn't deserve the friends I had found. I couldn't keep going like this. I couldn't keep doing this. I needed to do better.

I needed to *be* better.

Velvet Remedy appeared, tears in her eyes. Oh Goddesses no. Not Pyrelight too.

But this time my worries were in vain. "She'll live," Velvet announced. "If the shotgun was in better repair, it would be another story. But she's in bad shape. We should get her to someplace radioactive in the next few hours so she can begin healing properly."

"If yer lookin' for radiation," one of the Arbu ponies (a milk-colored mare with a stringy tan mane and a birth defect that left her with only one eye) said as she trotted up, shaking Velvet's hoof in a friendly greeting, "You can look ta the GRHAS breedin' facility just up the river. Mind the radigators. And don't go killin' any of 'em."

"Gerhas?" I wondered quizzically only to be answered with a sharp nod.

My eyes strayed to her flank. Her cutie mark looked like several sharp teeth, radigator teeth perhaps. She too had a little scar beneath her cutie mark. A small brand, it looked like, reminding me of the brand that had obliterated Calamity's cutie mark.

"Breeding facility?" Velvet Remedy asked. "Breeding what?"

"Why radigators, of course. Weren'tcha listening?" the mare replied.

"Oh," replied Velvet politely. "Littlepip… we should go."

I nodded numbly, ambling towards the *Sky Bandit.* SteelHooves was still there, keeping an eye on the life support cocoon strapped to the roof. The status of Elder Cottage Cheese had not changed. Calamity was pulling an old suitcase out of the rusty husk of a chariot. My little scavenger.

"Come back now, y'hear!" the green mare with the orange mane called out. "We'll have dinner."

* * *

"Third time this month I've had to break up a yelling match between Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe. Ever since Joe opened that new Starbucked across from Mr. Beans' Java's Cup. First it was just the two of them trying to undercut each other's prices. Then that shipment of coffee beans went missing and Jamocha Joe started throwing some nasty accusations. Totally groundless, as it turned out. Shipment got rerouted to Fillydelphia because of some 'glitch' in the Starbucked terminal system. Can't stand those things. They seem downright un-pony.

"Yesterday, though, Jamocha Joe unveiled a new ad for Starbucked Steamy Coffee, and hoo-wee. Never felt more like buying a cup of coffee in my life, just to show my appreciation. Now I don't know what makes 'steamed' coffee so different from any other type, but Mr. Beans was sure steamed about the ads. Called it 'blatant use of sex to sell coffee', and I reckon he was pretty on the nose about that. Mr. Beans rallied together a flock of local ponies to stand in front of Joe's place decrying the poor guy as immoral and degenerate – the whole think-of-the-children routine – and harassing customers. When I arrived to break it up, one of the old mares hit me with her protest sign. Jamocha Joe came out to help, and before I knew it, Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe were in each other's muzzles, and it looked like it was going to come to bucks. Didn't help that Mrs. Weather's stupid, yappy poodle got loose and was adding its own head-splitting noise to the ruckus.

"Got them settled, and went right to Qwik-Kare for some stitches. I can't believe I quit my job in Manehattan for this crap."

Calamity's suitcase had been locked. Opening it, I found an old security guard uniform, a cattle prod, a Four Stars month's pass on the Luna Line and a comic book (*Sword Mares,* the cover featuring a mare who was rendered to be ridiculously hot to the point of deformed, wearing equally ridiculous flank-baring armor and holding a sword in her muzzle as she faced down a monster that looked like a cross between a giant yao guai and Nightmare Moon, a wide-eyed buck cowering behind her). In addition, there were a whole mess of audio logs. Most of the logs had deteriorated beyond salvation, but I was able to download eight of them into my PipBuck.

My PipBuck was clicking at me with a chiding voice.

Calamity circled the *Sky Bandit* around the ruins of the garish pink-and-green hatchery building with the cartoonish, smiling alligator statue out front. The hatchery sat between the Manehattan edge of the gloomy river and a set of train tracks which crossed the street leading up to it. All about were strewn tank cars, most of which were leaking a glowing toxic sludge. When the Balefire Bomb had detonated, the train had derailed, spilling its shipment of radioactive waste across several blocks. The hatchery had gotten the worst of it. Several train cars had been flung into the building and its water pens, smashing them apart.

Gummy's Retirement Hostel & Alligator Sanctuary

I spotted at least a dozen giant radigators milling about in the water pens and along the shore. Through a shattered wall of the hatchery building, I saw the shadowy movement of a legendary radigator easily the size of one of the train cars.

"We're not going inside," I announced. The mare from Arbu had asked us not to harm the local wildlife. I wasn't sure why, as the radigators posed a clear threat to the town just downstream. I suspected the bridge underturrets along Bucklyn Cross regularly had more to shoot at than just bloodwings. "There's a big one in there that looks like he could swallow me whole."

Velvet Remedy nickered, "We shouldn't need to. Just set us down on the roof, Calamity. I'll put Pyrelight someplace cozy to rest." She looked down sorrowfully at the wounded bird wrapped in blankets. The phoenix coughed and shuddered, sending a twinge of worry through my friend.

"Gotcha," Calamity called back. "But be quick. Ah don't think that roof is held up by much more'n wishful thinkin'."

"Why do you believe the ponies wish us to keep these beasts alive?" Xenith pondered.

"Ah'll tell ya why," Calamity laughed. "Cuz radigator is good eatin'!"

Velvet Remedy made a face and Xenith looked vaguely ill. I, on the other hoof, felt like I had missed an opportunity back on my first day outside. I hadn't even thought of killing and cooking one of the radigators near the Big Macintosh memorial.

Calamity flew us in for a landing on the rooftop. He touched down with a clop of his hooves. There was a warning groan and the roof sagged perilously. I suspected Calamity might be right.

Velvet Remedy got out, floating Pyrelight's wrapped body next to her, and began to cross towards a set of crates on one corner of the building, moving cautiously on the unstable surface.

"I'm going to leave you right over here for a while," Velvet cooed softly. "There's lots of nice, warm radiation here. You'll be feeling your old self in no time."

The click-clicking of my PipBuck insisted that she was correct. And that we should all drink some RadAway as soon as we got away from here.

Velvet didn't see the pressure plate. To be fair, neither did I. The damn thing was well camouflaged. She was nearly to the crates when she stepped a hoof onto it. One of the crates burst open with an explosion of colorful streamers, confetti and party glitter. The sound of trumpets blasted through the air and several two-hundred-year-old balloons… did nothing but lie there in the bottom of the crate, deflated and greasy with rot.

Velvet Remedy jumped back several feet in panicked surprise. She landed on all four hooves with a soft thump.

The roof collapsed out from under us.

I felt an awful, lurching weightlessness as the *Sky Bandit* tilted and began to fall into the empty space where half of the roof used to be. Calamity flapped his wings quickly, lifting us into the air again as I lashed out with my magic to wrap Velvet Remedy and Pyrelight in bubbles of levitation.

Several chunks of ceiling splashed into pools below or clanged off of metal walkways as they fell. A crumbling rumble belched up from the building below us.

Velvet and Pyrelight slowly floated back towards the waiting *Sky Bandit.* Obviously, we would have to choose someplace else to cradle Pyrelight while she recuperated.

The hulking head of the legendary radigator snapped up through the opening. I barely pulled Velvet and Pyrelight out of the way, the creature's scales brushing against Velvet Remedy and knocking her out of the levitation bubble.

Velvet fell. The charcoal unicorn hit the side of the creature, sliding down its scales and splashing into a pool of much smaller radigators below.

The mammoth radigator twisted about and opened its maw, snapping at the *Sky Bandit.* With a mixture of comedy and horror, I realized the monster had no teeth. The huge jaws closed into our ride, threatening to drag us down as the monster gummed at the *Sky Bandit.* Calamity yelped, his body slamming into a bent girder as he was swung around helplessly in the air, barely sparing his wing.

Velvet Remedy splashed, struggling to keep her head above the water as the smaller radigators closed in. Swimming was not a skill normally developed in Stable life. The closest radigator opened its maw, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth. Frantically, she threw her anesthetic spell at it. Then flung her forelegs over the paralyzed creature like it was a life preserver.

The behemoth radigator was pulling us into the hatchery. Still not wanting to kill this thing, I drew out the poisoned dart gun for the first time in ages, firing shot after shot into the soft tissue of its gullet.

The legendary radigator released us, tottering and collapsing back into the pool below. The splash hurled Velvet Remedy over the side of the pen, along with several extremely not-toothless radigators. Calamity grunted, flapping his wings as he regained control of the passenger wagon.

I threw another telekinetic field around Velvet Remedy, pulling her up from the floor as several radigator jaws chomped at the space she had just vacated.

"Plan B?" Xenith asked, not missing a beat.

* * *

> *"I was just starting to soak in a luxurious bath when I got an emergency call from the mall. Mrs. Weather was reporting a robbery. I get there, soaking wet, my uniform clinging to my coat, only to hear that the thief was the Sunny Suds' new Sparkle-Cola machine, and the theft was a single bit. Apparently, she'd hit the button for one of those new Sparkle-Cola Rads, and the machine dispensed a normal Sparkle-Cola. Oh, the horror.*
>
> *"The operator at Sunny Suds naturally had no way of getting into the machine. I could probably do it with a crowbar, but then I'd probably be fined for the damages. I instead just gave her one of my bits. Which she promptly put into the machine, hitting the same button and getting the same damned result. I feel I should receive an award for refraining from using the cattle prod on the old hag."*

An hour (and a couple packets of Rad-Away) later, the *Sky Bandit* flew over the designated meeting spot. The Steel Rangers had changed their configuration. Many of the backup rangers were now hiding in places that couldn't be targeted from the air. Either that or they had left, but I didn't believe the latter was at all likely.

I licked the inside of my muzzle. Rad-Away tasted like rancid orange juice and it left an aftertaste that was, somehow, even less pleasant. I suspected that somepony had decided to make Rad-Away fruit-flavored as a marketing technique. I wished I could meet that pony so I could shoot her with a poisoned dart.

Pyrelight was resting on one of the broken tank cars, bathing in radiation. The giant radigators shouldn't be able to reach her so long as she doesn't roll off the tanker. Velvet Remedy had planted herself a safe distance away, just out of the radiation zone, keeping watch through my binoculars. She had her anesthetic spell in case Pyrelight should fall or one of the radigators should figure out how to get up to her hiding spot, and combat shotgun and plenty of ammo in case the spell wasn't enough.

As Calamity circled the lot, the rain finally let up.

We landed, minus our medical pony, on the edge of the parking lot, facing eight Steel Rangers whom we could see, and several whom we could not. According to my E.F.S., one of them was outright hostile, a spot of red in the sea of lights on my compass, even though she stood her ground patiently like all the others.

We waited as Calamity released himself from the *Sky Bandit's* harness and shook the rain out of his coat. Then he flew up and released the chains binding Elder Cottage Cheese's life support pod to the roof mounting. As I floated the pod down to hover behind us, Calamity grabbed Spitfire's Thunder and took off into the air. SteelHooves grunted and took the lead. I followed, floating the pod. Xenith behind me.

The atmosphere was like a rubber band, stretched to the point of fraying, about to snap.

"Goddesses, I don't like this," I muttered under my breath. I had telekinetic sheaths around all my weapons even though they were still in their holsters. Armor-piercing or magical rounds were loaded into each. My ears swiveled, trying to pick up the sounds of the Steel Rangers we couldn't see as they moved into better positions, their little lights sliding back and forth on my E.F.S. compass.

Two of the Steel Rangers approached. One of them was a unicorn scribe wearing robes of pre-war armored mesh. The other was the red light on my compass, a paladin whose battle saddle held what looked like two anti-tank guns. The others stood at the ready, weapon ports open on their battle saddles.

"We were expecting Steel Ranger Traitors, not one traitor and a bunch of tribals," miss hostility growled. Then her head bobbed as she took in SteelHooves. "But it seems they did grace us with SteelHooves himself. So tell me, Hoovy, are they actually calling you Elder now?"

Hoovy?

"I have accepted the position," SteelHooves said shortly. "I believe you have somepony who wished to join us in exchange? Send her out now, take your Elder and go in peace."

"Oh, Knight Ant Meat?" the unicorn said with a note of regret that didn't touch her eyes. "I'm afraid she won't be joining us after all. Took a gallop off the short end of the bridge while trying to evade incarceration."

I felt my skin tighten around the hairs of my mane. SteelHooves' stance didn't change. His voice seemed unmoved by the news, although I suspected he had to be enraged inside. Were they trying to provoke something?

"More is the pity," SteelHooves replied evenly, standing very still. "The Elder had a bit of an accident of his own before we could depart. He is unconscious, but alive."

A few of the Steel Rangers bristled and stomped, but nopony made a foalish move, and the two addressing us seemed to shrug off the news as inconsequential.

"Paladin Amaranth," the unicorn scribe said in a tone that only pretended to ask, "Would you please check Elder Cottage's pod and make sure all is in order?"

The armored paladin with the anti-tank weapons trotted forward a step, stopped, then took several steps back.

"Paladin Amaranth?" the unicorn questioned.

"This is a problem," Amaranth intoned. "These aren't just any group of tribals. These are the Stable Two tribals. That's the Stable Dweller." She nodded towards me.

"Yes, I realize that," the unicorn said impatiently. "But I don't see how that matters."

"It matters," Amaranth growled, "Because DJ Pon3 has a boner for her." I cringed at that, the mental image being all manner of wrong. "And he's got the whole wasteland believing whatever she says. If it was just the Outcasts, anything that went down here would be our words against theirs. But with her…"

The unicorn scowled. "And what, pray tell, do you think is going to happen here where the truth wouldn't favor us?'

Paladin Amaranth took two more steps back. "This is blown. Kill them all."

The moment she spoke, every spot on my E.F.S. compass changed to red. Except for the unicorn.

"What?!" the unicorn shouted, spinning around to face the others. "Belay that order!"

It was too late.

SteelHooves had been standing still, targeting Steel Rangers with his armor's targeting spell even as he talked. Before any of the Steel Rangers could react to the words of either Paladin Amaranth or the unicorn, our Applejack's Ranger was firing loads of high-explosive grenades at them. Three of the Steel Rangers were blown into armored giblets before the unicorn had finished saying "order", the word drowned out from the host of detonations.

Paladin Amaranth fired at SteelHooves almost point-blank, the rounds from her twin anti-tank guns punching through his armor and flesh and exiting the other side in perfect holes. SteelHooves fell to the ground with a metallic thump. His light on my compass winked out.

Amaranth turned back towards me with a swift canter only to find herself looking down the barrels of a sniper rifle, a zebra rifle and Little Macintosh. I pulled every trigger. From the way blue sparks erupted from the holes I blew in her armor, the magically-enhanced bullets in Little Macintosh were probably the ones which killed her.

The world around me erupted as the three remaining Steel Rangers launched grenades and missiles at us, neglecting the safety of the Elder and the unicorn alike. Mercifully, most of the first volley missed. They had been targeting SteelHooves, and the moment he went down, their targeting spells lost their lock. I felt shrapnel and fire slash at me as I was knocked to the ground, my ears ringing. The magical grip I had on my weapons evaporated.

Even through the near-deafness caused by the explosions, I could still hear Spitfire's Thunder echoing across the Manehattan shoreline. Two of the Steel Rangers dropped, dead before they hit the ground. The third fired two rockets. I watched as Xenith galloped past me, dodging between them, and planted herself on her forehooves, swinging about to buck the knight's helmet with such force that it broke his neck.

As she looked at me, I saw she had a vial clenched between her teeth. She dropped it. The vial shattered against the ground and the lot began to fill with fireless smoke.

I pushed myself to my hooves, pain lancing through multiple parts of my body. My PipBuck was sending me medical warnings. Some of my cuts were pretty deep, and I was bleeding badly. My inventory sorter immediately placed within reach the remaining medical supplies I had taken from Velvet Remedy earlier. I administered the last of the painkiller and downed a healing potion.

More explosions tore the ground near me, throwing me back. My head hit the concrete hard enough to daze me. The Steel Rangers who had remained hidden before had now moved into positions that gave them clear lines of fire. My ears were ringing and my vision blurred, but I could still tell the sound of machine gun fire.

The smoke and dust were obscuring my vision as much as anything else, but my E.F.S. was still picking out targets. I had no idea what had happened to Xenith. I looked around, blinking concrete dust out of my eyes, but I couldn't see her. Not even the friendly light that should be her on my compass.

Another light flared up, a friendly one, as a terrible sound warped the air. SteelHooves got back to his hooves in a vortex of unseen necromantic energy. Canterlot Ghoul's don't stay dead. You have to turn them to ash or dismember them to keep them down.

I was at once thankful and horrified, fearing even more our trip into the Canterlot Ruins.

Somepony was crawling towards me. A friendly light on my compass. I turned, expecting to see Xenith. It was the unicorn scribe. She was dragging herself across the broken asphalt, a swath of red smearing out behind a tattered flank. An explosion had torn off one of her legs.

"I…" she said weakly, focusing on me as if her life depended on it, "…don't… understand…"

Her life didn't depend on me. It was already over. For the second time that day, I administered painkiller (all that I had left) to a pony who should have been my enemy.

* * *

I found myself laying down on a straw bedroll in the common lot of Arbu, watching colorful ponies trot about. Many of them stopped to wave hello, or trotted up to great me. "Friendliest town in the wasteland" had been the claim on their sign, and they seemed determined to live up to that. As one pony (a fairly ugly puce-colored mare with a withered left hindleg and a cutie mark that looked like a stew pot) told me, "Well, we got t' be good at somethin'. And everything else 'bout this town sucks. So it might as well be us that's the good part, right?"

Most of the store fronts had boarded-over windows, except for the Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare (whose windows were covered in aged fliers and posters) and Virtue Comics (which no longer had a front wall, much less windows). Still, the entire place was clearly in use, the home for a half a dozen pony families.

We would be spending the night here. The good ponies of Arbu insisted on being gracious hosts after we came to the merchant's rescue earlier today.

I was too numb to argue. Or, really, to feel anything. Part of that, I knew, was the painkillers that Velvet Remedy had doped me with before wrapping me in enough bandages to be a museum exhibit. Come see the mummy of the rare Stable Dweller. Beware the curse.

I couldn't remember how the fight ended. I couldn't remember much past holding the unicorn scribe as she passed from this life. I had a concussion. Velvet Remedy warned that I might have blacked out.

"Thanks again for your kind help, stranger," the merchant pony was saying to Calamity. "That might have been the end of me if you hadn't stepped in."

Velvet Remedy trotted up to me, seemingly from out of nowhere. She gave me a gentle kiss on the horn as if I was her little filly. "How is your head?"

I grunted in response. My head was full of crying shadows.

"You'll be okay, Littlepip," she said soothingly. "Just rest." She sighed as soon as she said it. "Why do I even bother saying that?"

"Where were you just now?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Helping patch up the merchant's brahmin," she replied, indicating the two-headed cattle. "One of them took a few bullets and the other had a sliver of glass wedged in her hoof. It will be another day or two before the first brahmin can travel, so the merchant will be joining us here for dinner."

I nodded. "That was nice of you." I wondered how the hell you could notice a sliver of glass in the bottom of a creature's hoof. I mean, they were standing on it, right?

"Oh, she told me," Velvet said casually as I vocalized the last question. Then she kissed my head again, informing me, "I'm going to go sit with Calamity." She trotted off, leaving me wondering when she had picked up an ability to communicate with animals. The gears of my mind felt broken, and I was sure I was missing something.

Getting up, I started to look around. I had nothing better to do, and my usefulness seemed to be limited to shooting things. I played another of the audio logs of an unnamed mall security guard.

> *"Spent the day at my niece's birthday party. First time I actually wanted to be called away, so naturally nopony had any problems. I was tempted to feign a call anyway. I know that is awful and selfish of me, but Darling is suffering from Wartime Stress Disorder, and there's really nothing I can do to help. I hated just standing there feeling useless, sharing worried looks with my sister as Darling went on and on, muttering things like 'So what if it's my birthday? We could all be dead tomorrow. I hate this war! Why does it have to be like this? Is it really too late to come to a peaceful resolution? I'm sure not all zebras are bad.' Nopony was enjoying the party.*
>
> *"According to sis, Darling has been depressed for months now and nothing she does seems to pull her out of it. She was really hoping the birthday party would raise the girl's spirits, but if anything, it seems to have made her even more withdrawn. Sis is at her wit's end. I advised her that it was time to call the Ministry of Peace. Darling needs help that we can't give her."*

One of the Arbu ponies trotted up to me, a canteen around her neck. "Would you care for some water?" I realized I was parched and nodded. My PipBuck clicked softly as I levitated the offered canteen close. The mare looked apologetic.

"I'm afraid all we have is dirty water here. The purifier's down again. Been down all week. We've captured as much rainwater as we could, but we're saving that for the children."

I nodded, understanding, and took a small drink. Just enough to be polite and to wet my mouth. Then, remembering that it might be a long time before I had water even this good again, I took a deeper sip. The Goddesses only knew what the water would be like in Canterlot. Velvet Remedy had loaded up on canteens of pure water before we left Tenpony.

"GIT! GIT YER SORRY HIDES OUTTA HERE! Y'ALL AIN'T WANTED HERE!"

I jumped at the voice booming from the loft above what had once been a Custard's Cakes shop.

"Grandpa Rattle, you get back in yer room!" the mare with the canteen shouted back.

"GIT OUT! GIT OUT AND DON'TCHA EVER COME BACK!" the crotchety old buck yelled, levitating a stick and wiggling it in a threatening manner. "I'VE GOT A SHOTGUN!"

He had a stick.

The mare looked abashed. "Please don't mind Grandpa Rattle. His mind's a bit gone."

Above I saw the green mare with the orange mane whom I'd spoken to before appear at the old buck's window and gently but forcibly guide him back into his room. The canteen mare gave me an embarrassed smile as she reclaimed her canteen, and trotted off.

I shook my head, feeling a bit woozy, and looked around for my friends. I glanced towards where Pyrelight was sleeping, perched on an old vendor sign above where the brahmin were tethered. She was glowing softly, mostly healed and sleeping off her injuries. I trotted closer, admiring the subdued majesty of the sleeping phoenix.

I clicked another audio diary entry.

“Today has been the latest chapter in the continuing war between Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe, and I must say, I really don’t like where this is headed. Jamocha Joe is threatening to sue Mr. Beans over his latest advertising campaign, which features the assertion that ‘all our beans are Equestrian grown’. According to Jamocha, the ads are trying to paint Starbucked as unpatriotic, suggesting that some of their beans might come from zebra lands. I tried to point out that the ads said no such thing, but he wouldn’t listen.

“I talked to Mr. Beans about the new ads, and he said (and I quote), ‘Hey, I’m not sayin’ his beans are zebra beans. I’m just sayin’, y’know, do you know where his beans come from? Cuz I don’t. But our beans are pure, 100% patriotic pony beans. That’s all I’m sayin’, okay?’

“Just awesome. Mr. Beans reminded me that winter was almost here and that winter makes or breaks a pony in the coffee business. He needed every edge he could get against Starbucked. I told him that maybe he should instead try to make coffee that didn’t taste like it was filtered through something used to wipe a mule’s backside.

“‘But that’s how coffee’s s’posed t’ taste!’ he told me.”

* * *

Sandy Shore.

That was the name of the black-coated bandit’s son. I kept watching him from across one of the picnic tables in the Arbu common lot as I ate from the meaty bowl of stew that the good ponies of Arbu had offered us.

Sandy Shore was lethargic, slow to respond, and very withdrawn. His eyes were red from crying, but he wasn’t crying now. He was staring at his stew with very little interest. I empathized. It was an absolutely delicious stew (radigator is good eatin’), but I just didn’t have any appetite. I put another spoonful into my mouth, chewed and swallowed mostly from rote memory.

My PipBuck clicked slowly at me. The stew was made with mildly irradiated river water. After the radiation exposure at Gummy’s, I wasn’t so concerned about the negligible amount I was ingesting from the “dirty” water used in the stew. I was a touch worried about the colt, but I had to imagine he had ingested worse. Often. And at least the water in his glass was pure rainwater.

“So, what’s the market here?” I heard Velvet Remedy ask. She and Calamity were chatting amiably with several of the Arbu ponies and the caravan merchant at the next table.

SteelHooves was sitting nearby, keeping watch over Elder Cottage Cheese in his medical pod as the repair spells enchanted into his armor slowly patched up the gaping holes created by Amaranth’s anti-tank guns. I’m not sure what SteelHooves planned to do with the Elder now. I didn’t think he knew either.

“We’re always lookin’ fer parts to keep up that damned piece o’ shit water purifier,” Emerald Fire (the green mare I had met before) told her. “And more RadAway, especially fer when it’s broke. Which is like every day that ends in ‘y’. Beyond that? Basic supplies. And, by the fucking Goddess, if we could just get some toilet paper!”

By the Goddess? Which one? Or did they actually follow *that* one here?

Velvet Remedy had caught that too. “The Goddess?” she asked politely.

“Yeah, ya know. Unity and all that crap. We’re all going to be together as one, ain’t we?” Emerald Fire’s raised voice brought laughter from nearby picnic tables. Lowering her voice, “We had one o’ her wanderin’ preachers come through a few years back. It was a bad year fer us, so we took some solace in him.”

Velvet Remedy nodded and then redirected the conversation. “So what do you barter with here?”

“Meat,” the milk-colored mare spoke up proudly. “Come from generations of radigator hunters.” She thumped a hoof on her chest. I understood now why she didn’t want us killing the monsters in the hatchery. The giant radigators were their livelihood.

I faded out of the conversation. I was having trouble keeping focus. I looked down at my stew and realized I’d eaten more of it than I thought. My head was throbbing even behind the painkillers.

Sandy Shore had pushed away from the table and was wandering off towards a section of the strip mall which had once been a Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare. Amongst the faded posters and fliers papering its windows, I spotted a grey one with black block letters:

Remember what Separates
Ponies from Zebras
Not Stripes. Not Cutie Marks.
But What is Inside
THERE IS GOOD IN ALL OF US!

No pictures. No Ministry affiliations. It almost looked like it could have been locally made. Embarrassment pushed through my numbness. I hoped Xenith hadn’t seen it. I looked across the lot to where she was eating food of her own cooking. Alone, save for the merchant’s cattle, one of whom had bandages wrapped around its leg courtesy of Velvet Remedy.

“What are the marks on yer flanks?” I heard Calamity ask as I got up from the table and made my way over to Xenith. “They look like brands.” There was an odd tone in his voice.

“Yep. It’s an Arbu mark,” a mare told him proudly. “We get it after we eat the heart of our first kill. Only ponies with an Arbu mark can vote in the town council…”

I settled down next to Xenith, tuning out the conversation the others were in. I was having trouble following it anyway. Probably the concussion. Or maybe it just didn’t seem so important. It was hard for such little things to seem important when I kept seeing Sandy Shore hugging his father, crying. Or the mare whose eye had become a horrific black moon-sun thing. Or the unicorn scribe murdered by her own Rangers in some sort of political move I still didn’t understand.

I looked at what Xenith was eating. “Please tell me they didn’t refuse to offer you food,” I said, my hackles rising.

“No,” she said simply. “I cooked for the medical pony and myself. Neither of us cares for stew of meat. I just hope I did not offend.”

Oh. Oh yeah. That makes sense. “We should be apologizing to you,” I replied earnestly.

“Why?”

"Well… because…" I glanced back in the direction of the poster. Maybe she hadn't seen it.

"You did not write that." Dammit, she had. "Nor any of the ponies alive today, here or elsewhere. You should not apologize for what ponies who are not you did long before you were around to stop them."

My head swam a bit, and it took me a moment to realize we weren't just talking about ponies. I nodded, understanding. "None of us would blame you for what happened in the war." I paused, realizing that wasn't correct. "Well, SteelHooves would, but I think even he is coming around." My thoughts returned to the poster. "They could have at least painted it over though."

"They are hunting their prey to extinction," Xenith informed me. "Soon there will be no more meat to barter with. I do not begrudge them for not spending what little they have on such luxuries as paint."

I thought of the number of radigators we had seen at the hatchery. When I had been thinking we might have to fight them, there had been a lot. But when viewed as both food and trading supplies, there were hardly any. I hoped the river held significantly more and found myself wondering what a "bad year" amounted to here in Arbu.

My brain seemed to slip. I felt like I had lost a bit of time. Back at the tables, I heard Calamity asking where the new graves where. I felt a sudden urge to pay my respects to the bandit I had killed, no matter how ludicrous or meaningless the act would be.

"Oh we ain't buried them yet," an Arbu buck replied. "Ground's too muddy. Got the bodies locked up in the clinic cellar fer now."

Emerald Fire shot a dark look at the buck. Calamity nodded. Velvet Remedy coughed with alarm, "Hey, isn't that where Sandy Shore was headed?"

"Don't worry, miss. Got the cellar locked up tight. Nopony's gonna get in there without the key."

Yeah. Because apparently the only pony in the entire wasteland who can pick a lock is me. No, wait, there is at least one other. Probably part of the Fillydephia Steel Rangers. Or maybe somepony who works for Red Eye.

I stopped, suddenly suspicious that my lockpicking rival must be Red Eye himself. I had no facts to base such an assumption on, but it felt right. The sense of duality was too perfect.

The certainty slipped from my wounded mind almost as quickly as it manifested. I found myself staring at a puddle and not knowing how long I had been doing so. I looked up swiftly enough for my head to pound. But everypony was where they were when I last saw them. Except Sandy, who was sitting morosely in the corner between the clinic and a dark vertical wall-sign for Starbucked, the coffee shop that wasn't Java's Cup.

As the first rays of sunset dipped below the cloud cover, the wall sign suddenly lit up, bucked on by some ancient timer miraculously still running. Other lights flickered on, about a third of them still functional, illuminating the mall in patchwork pools of light. My eyes caught on the sign and lingered there: an image of two very attractive mares – twins, one with a cream-colored mane and a coffee-brown coat, the other with the same brown for her mane and a creamy coat – who were entwined around each other almost as much as their tails were entwined around a cup of steaming coffee with the Starbucked logo, all backlit by lights that flickered and threatened to go out.

My mind supplied a logo for them: "Buy our coffee and we'll let you watch us make out."

"What was that?" Xenith asked. I flushed with embarrassment as I realized I'd said that out loud.

"Um… nothing. Just looking." I winced and quickly clarified, "At the coffee shop over there."

Xenith followed my gaze. "Are they bucking the stars, or are the stars bucking them?"

"I think they're bucking each other," I replied before I realized she wasn't paying attention to the lesbincestuous mares. I thought about turning to see her expression, but my eyes didn't want to leave the sign.

"Are you all right, little one?"

"Concussion," I answered. Then, in a transition that only made sense to me at the time, "Velvet Remedy talks to brahmin now."

"Ayep. She's a real kind pony, that one," one of the brahmin responded. "Polite too."

I began to nod. "Yes, she really… hubazawha?!" I jumped up, stumbling backwards over Xenith, and fell on my tail.

The brahmin's right head smiled at me while the left one continued chewing its cud obliviously.

"Y-you can talk?" I stammered, then flushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't know brahmin were… well…"

"Smart?" the brahmin head asked as I picked myself up, looking at Xenith apologetically. The zebra just shook her head.

"um… yeah," I admitted, feeling foalish.

She chortled. "Not many pony folk even try t' talk t' us. Not that I blame ya. Most of us are dumb as posts. Ain't that right, Herbert?" she said, looking at her other head.

The other head kept chewing. I looked to Xenith, but she was just watching me with amusement.

"Yeah, Ah don't really get any good conversation from him," she said dourly.

"You… um… I…" I felt stupid. "Sorry. Concussion. Brain no work-y. um… I'm Littlepip."

"Well howdy there, Littlepip. Ah'm Bess. And this is muh other half, Bob."

"Bob?" I asked, wondering how one head could be male and the other female. I looked Bess over. She sported several bandages including a bandaged leg in a medical brace courtesy of Velvet Remedy. Definitely a female brahmin, judging by her bulging udder. Although I couldn't recall if I'd seen any male brahmin. Not that I had been paying enough attention to notice if I had.

"Ayep. Bob," the brahmin told me. "I jus' call him Herbert t' get on his nerves."

"Oh." From the looks of Bob, nothing much could get on his nerves. I didn't think Bob was even aware that a conversation was going on.

"Most brahmin got two heads but only half a brain between 'em. I'm one of the lucky ones," Bess claimed. "If you c'n count being saddled for life with Bob here lucky. Anyhoo, tell that mare friend of yours thanks again for patchin' up muh leg. Did a real fine job, she did. Polite too."

"A mare from the Ministry of Peace took Darling away yesterday. Apparently, she's being held at a WSD treatment facility in Manehattan. I've picked up a renewable one-month pass on the Luna Line so that I can visit her regularly.

"Had our first snow today. Winter brings its own set of problems to the mall. Now I'm in charge of shoveling snow from the sidewalks and rooftops, keeping the lot salted so nopony has an accident. Business is picking up for the coffee shops, but most of the other stores are suffering the normal drop in customers. Only the regulars are up to braving the snow.

"Caught a couple hoodlums spray-painting disparaging things about Princess Luna on the backside of Sunny Suds. One of the delinquents tried claiming WSD as a defense for his actions. That pissed me right off. Having a family member who is really suffering, I'm sick of seeing ponies use WSD as an excuse for what's really just bad behavior. Then the other little bastard turned his spray can towards me and I finally got a chance to use this cattle prod. He was still shaking when the police ponies arrived.

"Spent the afternoon giving statements. Mrs. Weather's damned poodle peed on my leg while I was talking to the officer. I really wanted to club that little monster with the prod as well."

As the audio log ended, I trotted slowly over to the table where Velvet Remedy and Calamity were still chatting with the Arbu ponies. The merchant had finished eating and was rolling out a sleeping bag just inside the shattered storefront of what had been a comic book shop (sandwiched between Sunny Suds and Custard's Cakes). I could see another *Sword Mares* poster on the wall above rows of empty shelves.

"This is the fifth time this year that the damn water purifier has burned out. Honestly, Ah think the little bastard is simply beyond hope. We keep fixin' her up and jury-riggin' her together, but there's only so much we c'n expect," Emerald Fire was telling Calamity. "Once its gone, Ah don't know what we'll do. We've tried negotiating with the Steel Rangers for access to their water talisman, but all they do is shoot at us."

I came to a halt, blinking. "Wait…" I looked up at the dark silhouette of Bucklyn Cross, scattered lights illuminating small bits of the shadowed pier that towered out of the water just downstream of Arbu. Turning to SteelHooves, I asked, "That bit of bridge had a water talisman built into it?"

"No," SteelHooves replied with a slightly derisive tone. "But Elder Cottage Cheese brought several back with him from his raid on the Ministry of Peace hospital out near Friendship City."

"Friendsh…" I paused, "Hold on… *several?"*

"Yes. Even then, I think he was planning ahead."

"DAMMIT!" Grandpa Rattle screamed out from his loft. "YOU FUCKERS STILL HERE? GIT OUT O' ARBU BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!"

Emerald Fire facehoofed. "Will somepony shut him up?" A couple of ponies, including the one-eyed, milk-colored pony, scooted off.

"I'VE GOT A SHOTGUN!"

I ignored him, turning to Emerald Fire. "They have several water talismans in there, and they won't give you clean water?" My mental haze was fading, sharpening into deadly focus.

The green pony (with a cute little flame for a cutie mark above her Arbu brand) nodded. "We don't have much. Radigators have been gettin' scarce. But we're willin' t' trade what we've got for good water."

I felt a simmering anger. "Why should you have to? It's water! You need it to live."

SteelHooves bristled. Calamity jumped up. "Whoa there, Li'lpip." He neighed as he flew over to me, "Nothin' wrong with sellin' necessities iffin that's whatcha got t' sell." He whispering hastily, "Do remember these folk make a livin' sellin' meat."

SteelHooves nickered under his breath. "Applejack sold apples. Got a problem with that?"

I stopped, checking myself. In the Stable, the needs of life were provided by the Stable. Basic food, water, a place to stay, even barding. Work was assigned too, according to our special talent. We paid only for luxuries, either from the allowance that the Overmare assigned, or from the gains of profitable hobbies. That worked for Stable Two, but it was not the way of the Equestrian Wasteland. Still, I couldn't help but feel angry at the Steel Rangers' refusal.

"That's different," I insisted finally. "You're talking about ponies who work for what they sell. The ponies here risk life and limb hunting. Even gardeners toil to grow their vegetables. But the Steel Rangers… this is a water talisman. It provides water freely. They didn't even create it. They stole it!"

"Scavenged," Calamity correctly curtly.

"Fine. Scavenged. So they worked to get it too. But that doesn't mean they shouldn't share!" My voice was rising. Unbidden, a stupid song started playing in the back of my head. *You gotta share. You gotta care. It's the right thing to do!* I hated the song, but at the same time it struck me as impossibly sage.

Sandy Shore's glass had been filled with pure rainwater. But what would happen when the rainwater ran out and the water purifier still refused to function? I killed the poor colt's father. The least I could do was make sure the water he was drinking wasn't fucking poison. I owed him that much. I owed him a whole hell of a lot more.

"Littlepip," Velvet Remedy asked cautiously. "What are you thinking?"

"Load up Elder Cottage Cheese," I barked to SteelHooves. If I was the leader here, then I was damn well going to lead. "We're heading to Bucklyn Cross. But this time, we're not giving their Elder back for free. We're bartering."

SteelHooves neighed. "Judging from what happened this afternoon, what makes you think they even want their Elder back?" He walked towards me. "I've been thinking about this all evening, Littlepip, and I am convinced they were hoping he would die at our hooves. Or, at least, that they could claim so with little opposition. Dead, he is a martyr for their cause. Alive, he's the Elder who keeps sending Steel Rangers to their deaths in the Canterlot Ruins and whose leadership led to the crippling of the Manehattan contingent in his efforts to take Stable Two and Stable Twenty-Nine."

I stared back at him, taking that in. "Think they'll attack us again?"

"Probably."

"Good," I hissed.

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy gasped.

I turned to her, “I didn’t start this. But I’m itching to end it. One way or another, we’re coming back from Bucklyn Cross with a water talisman.” I scowled. “No, make that two. We’re getting one for Stable Twenty-Nine too.”

Calamity shook his head. “Li’lpip, think this through. Do that, ya sign Arbu’s death warrant.” I stepped back, stunned by his words. “Right now, they’re nothin’ t’ the Steel Rangers. Give ’em a water talisman, an’ you give ’em somethin’ the Steel Rangers want. An’ you know the way they’ll come t’ take it.”

I grimaced, thinking of the Steel Rangers’ attack on Stable Two. “Oh, I have. Not. Forgotten.”

Velvet Remedy cringed, her voice soft and still slightly raspy, “Littlepip… I know where this comes from. There is part of my heart that wants revenge on them too. But this isn’t right.”

“No,” I stomped. “I think it is. And I think it’s about damned time.” I looked over my friends. They were eyeing me with concern. Maybe even fear. “I understand if you don’t want to come with me on this one. I won’t think less of you.”

Xenith had held her tongue as she had done for years. Still saying nothing, she trotted to my side. Calamity shook himself, spreading his wings. “Ah ain’t sayin’ Ah don’t wanna go. Ah’m just sayin’ we do it smart. Friendship City ain’t too far from here. We take the first water talisman there and Velvet Remedy talks ’em inta a trade that includes water rights fer the Arbu ponies.”

I nodded. Calamity’s plan was much more sound than mine. “So you’re in?”

“Hells yeah,” Calamity grinned. “Y’think Ah’d pass up a chance fer an adventure with ya? After all muh whinin’ ’bout bein’ left behind?”

Velvet Remedy facehoofed. “Somepony should stay here with Pyrelight…” she began. Then sighed. “But you ponies are going to get yourselves killed without me.” She looked to me sternly, “But I don’t like this. And I’m going to do the negotiations. I don’t think any of you are diplomatically inclined towards the Steel Rangers right now.”

“Are you?” Calamity asked her.

“No,” Velvet admitted. “But unlike most of you, I can fake it.”

* * *

“Spent time with sis today filling out applications for a place in one of the Stable-Tec war shelters. The non-refundable deposit took most of my paycheck, but it will be worth it just to take one worry off of my sister’s head. Ever since Darling was taken, she’s been slipping from me. I think she’s been drinking, although I can never smell it on her breath when I’m over.

“I’ve been to visit Darling twice this month. She is definitely looking better and has some of her cheer back. Whatever the Ministry of Peace is doing to treat her, it seems to be working. She’s almost like her old self now. Only thing I’ve noticed that seems a bit off is that she seems to have forgotten things. I asked her about her birthday party and she got strangely quiet, then told me she doesn’t remember having one this year. The mare I spoke to at the hospital says that temporary memory loss is a side effect of her therapy.

“Honestly, it was just so good to see Darling smile again that I was fine with that.

> *"Saw one of those little hoodlums that I caught spray-painting a couple months ago. He was dressed up fine, mane combed, looking presentable. He stopped on the street to thank me for helping put him on the right path. I was so stunned I told him it was my pleasure. Asked him how that other buck was doing, and he looked away, saying something about trying not to think about bad influences.*
>
> *"Things at the strip mall have been interesting. Mr. Beans and Jamocha Joe have stepped up their advertising war. I fully expected to get an earful from Mr. Beans last week when Jamocha erected (no pun intended) that huge "hot and steamy" Starbucked sign with the twins Espresso and Latte laying all over each other surrounded by steaming cups of Starbucked. But he seemed almost cheerful about it.*
>
> *"Found out why yesterday when the new Java's Cup sign went up. Not as much sex appeal, but the billboard was huge! Easily twenty-percent larger than the Starbucked billboard. And the whole thing is done in patriotic colors with an image of Princess Luna in the corner endorsing it as 'The best thing to keep you up all night!' I have to wonder if he had permission to use her image like that.*
>
> *"Jamocha Joe spent most of today trying to persuade me that the Java's Cup billboard was too big, against regulations, and a hazard come the next windstorm. I told him to file his complaints with the zoning office."*

The sun was setting as the *Sky Bandit* flew towards the black form of Bucklyn Cross.

"Whoa nelly!" Calamity shouted, pulling up sharply as half a dozen automated turrets turned our way. Velvet Remedy threw her shield around him as the guns opened fire. Bullets and lances of colored light filled the air around us.

I focused, my horn glowing, as Velvet Remedy cast her disintegration ward over us. The light of my magic flickered around each turret on Bucklyn Cross – not just the ones shooting at us, but *all* of them. For good measure, I extended my spell over the sentinel robot I could make out on the bridge.

Calamity danced in the air, trying to keep the *Sky Bandit* from taking more than a few minor hits by putting himself between the guns and us. The shield around him was taking so many bullets it looked like a sparkler.

I focused harder, working as fast as I could. I knew I could do this; I'd effectively done it before. Just yesterday I crawled under the *Sky Bandit* and swapped out the spark batteries. I had the technical expertise. This was easy… but it was taking longer than I wanted.

Calamity's shield went down, a stream of bullets tearing through it and slashing across his side. Flesh wounds, little more than scratches, but over a dozen of them. He yowled. We suddenly dropped several yards as he briefly forgot to keep flying. Calamity spread his wings and caught air again as Velvet Remedy threw up another shield as quickly as she could.

All the turrets shut down simultaneously. I had unscrewed their maintenance plates and pulled their spark batteries. They were dead. The sentinel robot as well.

I scowled, floating several dozen spark batteries back to the *Sky Bandit.* I was going to give the Steel Rangers every chance to do the right thing. But if the exchange earlier today was strike one, then this was strike two.

Calamity lifted us back up and flew in for a landing.

"Responses came back from Stable-Tec today. Sis found them in the mail. She was weeping over them when I got home from work. I've been accepted. She has not.

"I've been given a special broadcaster. When the call comes, I'm to make my way to Stable Thirty-Four. The broadcaster will be my proof of acceptance according to the letter, which warned me not to lose it. I offered to give my sister the broadcaster and thus my place in Stable Thirty-Four. But she refused. She says she should be out here anyway. If the warning comes, she'll try to make it to Darling.

"I spent most of the evening pleading with her as she drank herself into a stupor. The rest I spent crying and trying to convince myself that it doesn't matter anyway. The Stables will never be used, after all. There's no way the zebras would dare use weaponized megaspells. It would mean their destruction as surely as ours. I have to believe that.

"It's bad when work has become the high point of my day. But I'm not sure how long that will last. Java's Cup is still losing a lot of business to Starbucked, and Mr. Beans is getting desperate. Today, Mr. Beans added a new vending machine to his coffee shop, an Ironshod's Ammo Emporium vendor. Now you can buy your caffeine and your bullets in one easy stop.

"No good can come of this."

As we landed, Velvet Remedy tossed up a shield in front of the *Sky Bandit,* molding it between the ruins of several chariots and then stepped out.

Several Steel Rangers came charging towards us. A rocket whisked out of one of their battle saddles, impacting on the shield, which immediately collapsed in a stark reminder of the limitations of our unicorn's magical power.

"Greetings, Steel Rangers!" Velvet said, magnifying her voice magically. **"We come in peace to negotiate the safe return of your esteemed Elder."**

I was willing to forgive the missile. But if they shot at her after her greeting, that would be strike three.

The Steel Rangers slowed to a brisk trot. They were not firing. At least, not yet.

"Bucklyn Cross is the property of the Steel Rangers," one of them called out, her own voice magnified by the armor she wore. "Leave at once. Any negotiations will commence afterwards."

"I know what this place is, Knight Riverseed," SteelHooves announced, stepping out of the *Sky Bandit* and striding up to Velvet Remedy's side. "And you would do well to mind your place. You are in the presence of two Elders, one of whom is speaking to you."

"St-star Paladin SteelHooves?" the knight mare asked, clearly recognizing SteelHooves' unique voice. She stammered, trotting in place a moment. "W-we d-don't recognize your authority anymore. You're a traitor."

"No, I am a loyalist to the Ministry Mare and the true purpose of the Rangers," SteelHooves told her flatly. "And you are a wet-behind-the-ears knight barely graduated from initiate, Knight Riverseed. Send out the pony in charge here!"

"um… That would be me, sir."

SteelHooves stood silent. Then, calmly, "You're kidding." The Steel Rangers stared back at us, three more joining the three already facing us. I spotted two more stepping out of doorways high on the stone arches above, taking sniper positions. SteelHooves' voice couldn't hide his disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

"N-no sir," Knight Riverseed said, shifting hesitantly into a battle stance. "And I'm afraid I h-h-have to ask you t-to leave."

"I can see you are afraid, Knight Riverseed," SteelHooves replied. "We have come bringing Elder Cottage Cheese, whom we will return to you in exchange for two of the water talismans stored here in Bucklyn Cross. After that, we will leave. Not before."

Velvet Remedy was looking uncomfortable. Clearly, her intention to be the negotiator had gone up in smoke. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle and slipped out the sniper rifle, targeting the two ponies in sniper positions. Even with my skill and targeting spell, it would be a tricky shot to hit either of them. But even if I missed, I could at least pin them down.

The Steel Rangers looked as taken aback as they could considering they were completely concealed behind metal armor. "I-I'm sorry… what was that?"

"After the disgraceful actions of Paladin Amaranth at the previous exchange, you are lucky we are asking so low a price for the return of your Elder," SteelHooves informed her flatly. "Whom your own ponies shot at, so be careful whom you call a traitor."

Knight Riverseed hesitated once more, then took a step forward. "W-we can't comply with those demands and you know it. Request denied. Now get off our citadel!" The two light machineguns on her armor's built-in battle saddle clicked as they reloaded, pointing threateningly at us. But my E.F.S. was not registering her as hostile. It was a bluff.

"Are you really going to attack an Elder with two hundred years combat experience, backed by a team of wasteland heroes who have defeated a dragon?" SteelHooves asked warningly. "You. Can't. Win."

"I can't give you one water talisman, much less two," she spat back. "Your offer is absurd. And you are trespassing!"

This sounded like it was going downhill, but nopony was red on my E.F.S. compass yet. We could still talk this out. I was beginning to really hope we could. I hadn't realized how badly the losses at Stable Two and Twenty-Nine had depleted the Manehattan contingent of the Steel Rangers. The battle earlier today must have taken out their remaining hierarchy. All that were left were the knights left behind to guard the fort and probably a hoof-full of scribes.

These weren't the ponies who attacked Stable Two. They weren't the ponies who attacked us earlier either. They weren't even the ones responsible for refusing water to the civilians of Arbu.

POW!

One of the snipers fired at SteelHooves. The knight wasn't even red on my compass. I think it was an accident. The bullet ricocheted off the ghoul's magically-powered armor and struck Velvet Remedy. She fell with a yelp, bleeding out of a hole in her flank, her blood running down over her nightingale cutie mark.

Everything went to hell.

* * *

"Stop shooting at us!" I yelled. "Surrender!

The two unicorn scribes were clearly panicked. With all the alarms and the explosions outside, I wasn't surprised. One of them cast a blinding spell that filled the stairwell with strobing lights. I closed my eyes tight and fired blindly with the poisoned dart gun, not wanting to kill these ponies. Unfortunately, they weren't showing the same restraint.

A crackle of lightning cut the air, making my coat hairs all stand on end and filling the stairwell with the smell of ozone. I backed up the stairwell, pressing against the wall, nearly tripping on the steps. One of the unicorns had combat spells. I fired again, hoping that if I couldn't hit them, I could at least keep them from getting any closer.

The two water talismans we had come to procure dangled from my horn on chains. They were amazingly small things, no bigger than a particularly gaudy necklace. They radiated a cool power from the large sapphires in the center of their golden latticework, but were otherwise almost unremarkable. I had braved the internal rooms of the pier and picked one of the hardest locks I had ever come across in order to get them. But my relatively stealthy entrance was obliterated when the alarms went off.

I felt a cold breeze and could clearly hear the sound of SteelHooves' grenade machinegun as he battled knights with a fraction of the skill but just as much ridiculous firepower. When I dodged into the interior of Bucklyn Cross, Calamity had been swerving through the air, dealing with the two remaining sentinel tanks, the ones I'd missed.

Another bolt of electricity lashed out, this one hitting me square in my breast. My body locked up in intense pain. My magic imploded and the dart gun went tumbling down the stairs. I teetered, gasping, and fell back through the window.

Freefall, just for a fraction of a second but long enough for the pony in my head to be convinced that I was falling to my death. Then I hit the metal girder. I opened my eyes, blinking, my vision still swimming with foreign colors and shapes from the blinding strobe spell. I was laying on one of the understruts that had formed a latticework beneath the Bucklyn bridge, looking up at the underside of street.

A cold wind blew across me, carrying the first drops of another rainstorm. I turned my head and immediately regretted it. It was a long way down!

Okay. Being very, very still. Just float myself back into the window, I told myself. Not a problem.

The two unicorn scribes appeared at the window above me, their horns glowing. Motes of magical energy formed around one of them, forming into eldritch daggers.

I whipped out Little Macintosh, slipping into S.A.T.S. and fired twice.

* * *

Calamity flapped his wings and the *Sky Bandit* lifted away from Bucklyn Cross. The rest of us huddled in the *Sky Bandit,* which was now considerably more riddled with bullet holes. Next stop, Calamity insisted, we would start putting on armor. While we still had much of a passenger wagon left.

Xenith was tending to Velvet Remedy, who was breathing heavily as she slept. The bullet had lodged inside her flank, and Velvet had spent the battle digging it out while Xenith applied healing potions and zebra poultices as needed. Velvet would be okay, but she had lost a fair bit of blood and needed to rest.

In the end, only two of the Bucklyn Cross ponies surrendered. We let them go in one of the Cross's boats. I watched them as the crane lowered them, shuddering under waves of deep hurt at how very few ponies were in that boat.

We had stripped the fallen knights, scribes and initiates – fourteen in all – and built a funeral pyre. They deserved that much. I wondered if the Outcasts would claim Bucklyn Cross for their own now. We would take our two water talismans to Friendship City and Stable Twenty-Nine. But first we needed to rest. Arbu had offered us sanctuary and I was eager to take them up on it.

The light from the pyre danced into the sky. As if summoned, a streak of green and gold appeared, whirling and pirouetting amongst the flames.

I played the final audio log that I had been able to recover as we flew through the darkness.

> *"I woke up in the hospital this afternoon. Apparently, I've been in and out of surgery for two days. Fortunately, the company is paying for most of the costs, seeing as I was injured on the job. I'd gotten a frantic call from Mrs. Weather who was screaming about murder. I rushed to the mall as fast as I could, telling her to send a terminal message to the police.*
>
> *"We had had a doozy of a storm the night before. And when I got there, Sunny Suds' Laundromat was a complete disaster. Turns out Jamocha Joe was right about that fucking huge-ass billboard of Mr. Beans. Damn thing came crashing down this morning, a good three hours after the storm had passed, tearing through Sunny Suds' roof. The 'murder' victim, turns out, was Mrs. Weather's fucking poodle. She was screaming and hollering at Mr. Beans, so red-faced I thought she would explode, claiming that he murdered her poor little walking piss-dispenser. Like he was the one who left her damn dog in the laundromat while she popped out for a cake. I can't say I didn't laugh.*
>
> *"I didn't even see the batty old unicorn produce the firearm. I still don't know whether she was actually trying to shoot me, or if the bullet was meant for Mr. Beans and her aim is just that bad. I'm told the police have her in custody.*
>
> *"While I was in surgery, my Stable-Tec broadcaster went off. I missed the call, but that's okay. According to the message, this is just some sort of test run, like those fire drills they used to make us do in school. I've decided not to mention it to my sister. She's already too much of a mess.*
>
> *"Sis is here, looking more depressed and anxious than ever. I don't think she's been sleeping. I told her the doctors all say I will be fine, I'll be up and about, good as new, by the end of the week, but I don't think she was really listening. I've been shot, and that's all she seemed to be able to focus on.*
>
> *"Well, that and the other thing. Apparently, while I was in surgery, ponies from the Ministry of Morale paid her a visit. According to Sis, they were asking all sorts of questions about Darling. Weird things, like what she'd said at her birthday party and about her internship last year with Four Stars. Sis was freaking out. I think… I think she's losing it.*
>
> *"I've seen this sort of thing before. As much as I hate it, I think it's time to call the Ministry of Peace. They're the only ones who seem to be able to deal with Wartime Stress Disorder."*

* * *

“Where is everypony?” I asked, trotting out of the *Sky Bandit.* “Hello?”

“It is late,” Xenith intoned. “They are likely all asleep.”

I nodded. Night had fallen during our battle on Bucklyn Cross. I looked about. All the stores were closed up, but there was light pouring between the boards covering the windows of Starbucked. I contemplated heading there, but decided that I didn’t want to break into anypony’s home. Instead, I made for the comic shop with its collapsed front wall. I could hear the snores of the merchant, but I was so weary and emotionally exhausted that I could sleep through a firefight.

I was not a good pony. I wanted to be a good pony. I tried to be a good pony. But today… today…

“Hey!” a voice hissed at me from the darkness. I turned to see Grandpa Rattle huddled in the shadows. I looked for any sign of a shotgun, and by that I meant a stick. Instead, I noticed the red marks above his hindhooves. I knew such marks well. They meant he’d been shackled. And recently. My eyebrows raised in alarm.

“Shussh. They don’t know this old man c’n still pick a lock,” he told me, astutely judging not only what I had seen but what I had made of it. “You and yer friends wanna high-tail it on outta Arbu. This is a no-good place.”

I blinked. “Wh-what do you mean? They seem perfectly nice to me.”

“Take a look in the basement, iffin ya don’t believe me. But don’t say I ain’t warned ya.”

The basement? In the Qwik-Kare. Where they kept the bodies they were going to bury tomorrow. I had a sudden, dreadful, sinking feeling in my heart.

Grandpa Rattle looked about nervously. “Y’all git. Hear me. Git!” Then he shambled back into the shadows. I considered following him, then turned and galloped silently for Helpinghoof.

* * *

There were three ponies in Helpinghoof Qwik-Kare. They were chatting around bowls of stew, cigarette butts and a game that involved black chits with white dots. They looked like a family, one of them a mare hardly older than a filly, just barely old enough to have her cutie mark. And, I noted, her Arbu mark. They also looked like guards. Either way, they never saw me pass.

The lock on the basement door was a surprisingly expensive one for a struggling town like this. Not that I didn’t figure they could have scavenged it from somewhere, but I would expect such a valuable would have been sold during their last “bad year”. It was still the easiest lock I had picked that evening.

The smell hit me immediately, followed by the sound of flies. But then, I was expecting to find bodies. I closed the door behind me without a sound and descended the steps cautiously, turning on my PipBuck light. The two water talismans clinked together softly, still hanging from my horn. One of them I had procured for this town, risking my life and the lives of my friends. Killing ponies I didn’t want to kill. Self-defense didn’t make them any less dead.

Clink. Clink.

The basement was an abattoir. Blood both new and very old stained the tile floor in splatters and streaks, running towards the drain embedded in the center. Bodies of ponies lay on the tables, carved not just open but apart. Skinned and flayed, the meat removed. I recognized the dead from Arbu and the bandits alike. The remains of more ponies were piled in barrels in a corner.

Beside the barrels were the refrigerators. They were lined up like soldiers wearing uniforms of discolored white except where they were stained with blood. Trembling, I approached one of them, my skin crawling as I stepped onto the sticky, wet floor. I reached out telekinetically to open the first refridgerator, feeling a sick terror at touching it even with my magic. It was locked.

So were the others. That didn't stop me.

I unlocked the first one and braced myself. I swung the door open. I saw the meat.

I turned, reeling. My gaze caught a pony skull hung on the wall next to the stairs where I couldn't see it before. The skull was mounted on a plaque. Beneath it, somepony had soldered the word UNITY.

We're all going to be together as one, ain't we? It was a bad year fer us, so we took some solace in him.

They ate him, I realized, my mind teetering on the darkest edge of night. They killed the preacher and they *ate* him.

Clink. Clink.

The black stallion who had been Sandy Shore's father lay on one of those tables. His ribs were cracked open. They'd cut out his heart.

It's an Arbu mark. We get it after we eat the heart of our first kill.

But *I* killed the colt's father. And I certainly wasn't going to…

Oh Goddesses…

I felt suddenly and violently ill. I stumbled against the wall, retching, trying to purge myself of every last bit of the evening's meal. My head began to pound again. I felt dizzy. My concussion.

And I'd *killed* for these ponies…

I shuddered and vomited again. Then spit repeatedly, trying to clear the taste from my mouth. I wanted to wash my mouth out with Rad-Away.

The water talismans knocked together. Clink.

The feeling of illness passed, leaving me just feeling violent.

* * *

"You're *cannibals!?"* I shouted as I burst back into the Qwik-Kare, telekinetically lifting all three ponies and choking them. *"What the FUCK is WRONG with you! The wasteland isn't fucked up enough!?"*

The mother of the family, the same apricot unicorn mare who had been collecting the bodies, levitated a knife from the table. I knocked it away with my own magic.

"You fed the colt HIS OWN FATHER, you sick monsters!?!" I raged, seeing nothing but red. The youngest mare was passing out. The other two struggled, the father trying to buck at me even through I was across the room. He only succeeded in kicking over the

table, spilling black chits and pony stew all over the floor. There was a rifle holstered on the underside of the table. The apricot mare focused, turning the whole table to fire at me.

Bang!

I felt the bullet impact my armor, bruising badly as it failed to penetrate. It hurt, but I didn't let myself even wince.

"Where. Is. The. COLT?" I growled. I needed to find him. To save him from this place. Him and anypony else here who could still be saved. As for the rest…

The father weakly pointed towards Starbucked. "Thank you," I hissed as I pulled the zebra rifle.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I dropped their burning bodies and trotted out the door.

A pony stumbled towards me from the darkness. I swung the zebra rifle around but stopped as I recognized the merchant.

"I heard a shot?" the merchant pony said, looking worried. "Are the bandits back?"

I studied the pony a moment before asking, my voice dangerous and low, "Did you know?"

The merchant froze, reassessing the situation. "Know… what?"

"That Arbu is full of cannibals. That the meat they are selling you is *pony meat.* Did. You. Know?"

The merchant pony blanched, looking immediately ill. The pony swayed, fighting to stay on all four hooves. That was answer enough.

"Go look in the basement," I said, pointing back the way I came. "Mind the bodies and the fire. Then go tell everypony you meet."

I turned towards Starbucked where light still poured out behind the boarded-up windows. I could hear my friends galloping towards me but I ignored them. Instead, I marched towards the door of the coffee shop.

The righteous fury of hell followed behind me.

* * *

"DJ Pon3 here, and I've got to tell you, I don't know what to make of this one, children.

"For weeks I've been telling you of the heroic deeds of the Stable Dweller, our Heroine in of the Equestrian Wasteland, our Bringer of Light in this time of darkness. But today…

"Another village in Manehattan has gone silent. Arbu is dead. Reports have reached me that every pony in the town, over two dozen, have been killed. And listen children, I don't know how to say this… but…

"But it looks like it was the Stable Dweller who was responsible. A witness from Bucklyn Cross reported seeing her opening fire on ponies in the Arbu commons.

"Now children… I don't want to believe this. I don't want to believe our heroine has turned on us. There must be more to this story than what I'm hearing. If you know anything about it, please contact my assistant Homage at Tenpony Tower. Anything at all…

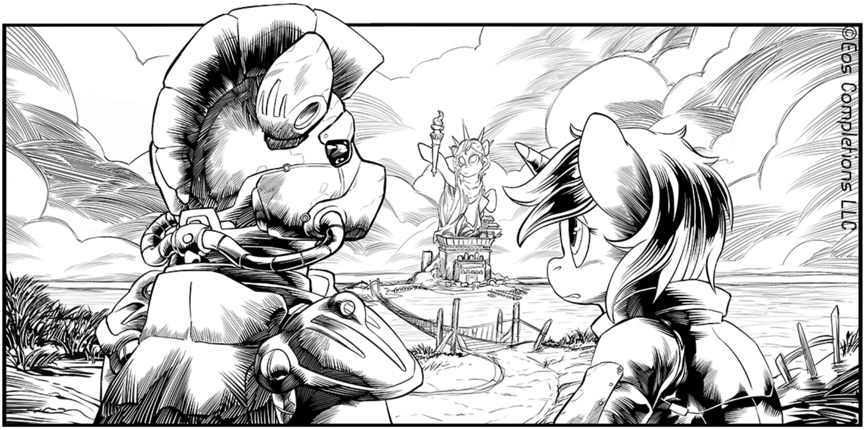
“I don’t know exactly what went down or why. But I’m not going to stop until I find out. And when I do, you’ll know too.

“This is DJ Pon3. Bringing you the truth. No matter how bad it hurts.”

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Thirty-Five

Cold Dawn Light



"I heard something about a town south of here being attacked, but details are sketchy. All I know is there haven't been any refugees showing up here. Which means either the attack wasn't too bad, or it was very, very bad."

"Heroes…

"We all need heroes, children. Now more than ever. It's a good fight that they're fighting, and they're doing it on behalf of all of us. But the Equestrian Wasteland is hard on heroes. No… it's brutal to them. It beats them down. It tears them apart. Eventually, every hero falls. Inevitably, every hero fails.

"Now listen close children. Heroes ain't machines from some Equestrian Robotics factory. Heroes are ponies, just like us. Doing the things that we should be doing because there ain't nopony else doing them. The true mark of a hero is not that they never fail, never fall down. I've said it a hundred times and I'll say it again: the one great truth of the wasteland is that every pony has done something they regret.

"No, you know a true hero by what they do after they fall. By the way they pick themselves back up again, shake themselves off, and throw themselves back into that good fight. Despite what they done, and despite the bleak prospects of a happy ending.

"Sad truth is most heroes don't survive. Or they become overwhelmed by the cruelty and despair and, disheartened, they give up.

"But in the Stable Dweller, the Bringer of Light, I've seen a hero of an entirely new tier. I was convinced… still am… that this heroine will never surrender to the wasteland, never give up.

"There is, however, one other fate that may befall heroes. When the horrors and the pain of the Equestrian Wasteland become too much for them, they can snap. They can turn into the very monsters they choose to fight. Sadly, children, it can

happen to the very best of ponies. Even Fluttershy had her Gardens of Canterlot.

"Now we don't know if that's what happened to our Heroine of the Wasteland. Or if there's more to this story than we've been told. We just. Don't. Know. But I can tell you this:

"The pony who first reported the slaughter at Arbu was from Bucklyn Cross. Now that's a Steel Rangers stronghold, and I got my reasons to take a critical eye to what they have to say. So I've started doing some digging. And I started that digging by trying to contact a gal I know at Bucklyn Cross, Riverseed. A trustworthy pony.

"Turns out she ain't there anymore. Nopony is. Bucklyn Cross, where our witness of the Arbu massacre claimed t' be from, is dead. Completely wiped out.

"Now children, I know this looks bad. Two communities in the vicinity of our Heroine wiped out. I'm still holdling onto hope, but I'd be remiss if I didn't send out a word of warning. Just on the chance that the Equestrian Wasteland's facing a whole new kind of dark.

"So if you see a band of well armed ponies, including a pegasus and a zebra, headed your way. Or a pegasus-pulled passenger wagon flying nearby… until we know better, maybe you best be someplace else.

"But if the Stable Dweller should come to your door, don't lock it. Because if our hopes are true, then she's more in need of our help and our support right now than ever before. And if our fears are true, then… well, children… she just might see that locked door as a challenge."

* * *

"…How bad?" Calamity demanded, his snout pushed up against Grandpa Rattle as if the two bucks were going to kiss. "Ah need t' know. Cuz Ah'm tryin' real hard here t' make this make sense, an' it ain't happenin'. Ah love Li'lpip, and Ah want this t' be right somehow. But all Ah'm seein' is a group o' good folk who took us in, fed us, offered us shelter, and got slaughtered fer their kindness."

I just wiped out a town. A whole town. I just killed… murdered… so many ponies.

My rage had burned itself out, leaving me an empty husk. I wasn't sad or angry. If anything, I just felt hollow. And slightly confused.

The events of the last… how long did it take? An hour? Less? I couldn't remember. My thoughts and memories were all jumbled and refused to straighten out. My comprehension of what I had done was as much from the evidence in front of me as from my fragmented recollection of my own actions.

"They were cannibals," SteelHooves stated, not for the first time. "You saw it yourself."

The basement! Go! See for yourselves!

That's what I had told them. My friends had caught up to me just after I stepped into Starbucked. But not before I started shooting. The colt was in there, Sandy Shore, I remembered that now. They were at a dinner table. Eating. Again. The bastards had already fed the boy his own father, and it wasn't enough for them.

I remembered the fire pit. Hot coals and flame and the rod of iron with the twisted ending that took the shaped of the Arbu brand, glowing. In my rage, I assumed they were going to brand him. But in the wake of things, that didn't make much sense. And, I think, one of the other ponies there had been in the firefight against the bandits this morning.

I remembered that Calamity had been shocked and concerned as he watched me open fire. Velvet had been nearly hysterical. *The basement!* I had shouted. *Go! See for yourselves!*

"Ain't ponies here left worth savin', boy," Grandpa Rattle told Calamity. "'Cept fer the kids. Anypony worth bein' called a pony left this town years 'go. Found *other* ways of surviving."

"Yer still here!" Calamity pointed out harshly.

"Somepony had to stay fer the little ones," the elderly buck replied. "And to warn folk away."

Calamity looked like he wanted to argue that, but Grandpa Rattle continued, "Every other pony here was a willin' party t' murder an' worse. Those who didn't… Some went on to Friendship City or Gutterville. Some just joined up with bandits. Hell, boy, half the folk you shot up this mornin' used to live here."

Calamity reeled a bit at that revelation.

The little ones, the children of Arbu, were huddled together behind Velvet Remedy's shield spell. My unicorn friend had maintained the shield since the fighting started, dropping it only when I floated a new filly or colt from one of the old stores. She hadn't fired a shot the entire time. Just stood there, inside her shield, guarding the children.

By the time I had come out of Starbucked, the colt and two young fillies in tow, the others had come out of the Clinic. They had seen what I had seen. But by then, it didn't matter. The rest of the town was awake and they were shooting back. If it hadn't been for Velvet Remedy, the town might have killed its own children in the crossfire.

Calamity had shot back in self defense, firing to wound and incapacitate. I remember his look of horror as I finished off a pony he had taken out of the fight through crippling. SteelHooves had also fought defensively, letting me enter each place first. But unlike Calamity, my ghoul friend didn't pull his bucks. Custard's Pies was burning from the missiles he had fired. Something in the architecture must keep the fires from spreading, I thought, because all of Arbu should have been burning to the ground.

I looked at the children. They hugged each other, crying, terrified. Cowering behind Velvet, casting horrified or hateful looks at me. I stood there and soaked up their hate; I couldn't blame them. The poor children had just seen me murder their parents, their families. More than one had heard their mothers scream out *"RAPE!"* as I first ripped their clothing from them, looking to see if they had taken the brand.

I swallowed as the first feelings returned to my soul. Pain and self-horror at what I had done to these children. What I had let them see in the name of saving them. Oh Goddesses, what damage had I done?

There were five of them in all. Plus the colt whose father I had killed. Plus one young buck with them, not much older than a colt. He was old enough to have his cutie mark, but his flank did not bear the mark of Arbu. He had eaten, knowingly, but he had been unable to bring himself to kill.

I spared him. He could be saved. In the entire town, he had been the only one, save for Grandpa Rattle and the children. Even in my rage, I hadn't wanted to believe that the *whole town* was vile. Surely, I kept thinking, there had to be a few more. Even just one? Now, listening to Grandpa Rattle, I understood why, except for the young buck, each and every attempt to find a redeemable pony had failed.

Calamity turned, trotting towards Velvet Remedy, barely casting a glance my way. He stared at the unicorn who had become his lover through the shield of magical energy she was maintaining around herself and the children.

"Ya said Li'lpip had a concussion, right? Could that explain all this?" My pegasus friend looked desperate. "She's not thinkin' straight, not 'erself, right? That could… excuse this?"

Velvet Remedy stared back at him through the glow of magic, eyes narrowing. "She shouldn't need an excuse!"

I stared silently, watching my friends argue about my actions. Take sides. I was struck mute, like I was in shock. Only shock didn't feel this dead. My headache had returned. Actually, it had never left. But the pounding was getting worse now. Bad enough I couldn't ignore it anymore, not even with all that was happening.

"Pardon?" Calamity asked, eyes widening.

"They. Were. Cannibals!" Velvet Remedy snorted. "Maybe it's hard for you to see, being so quick to eat meat yourself, but these… ponies… what they have done is evil beyond the pale."

"Hey!" Calamity shot back, raising his voice to match hers, "Ah get that they were cannibals. Puts 'em right up there with New Appleloosa on the list o' places Ah ain't gonna settle down. An' the fact they fed *me* pony makes this a place Ah would never come back to an' would be warnin' other folk 'bout."

I winced. Calamity: equating cannibalism to trading with slavers on the morality scale.

"But Ah wouldn't go slaughterin' 'em fer it!" Calamity continued. "Far as Ah c'n see, they only ate bandits, raiders an' the like. Ponies who needed t' be put down."

"Aaarguh!" Velvet gasped in exasperation. "There are some things you just don't do, Calamity! I'm not a naïve Stable filly anymore. I've seen how hard the Equestrian Wasteland is. I know that you have to do awful things out here. Looting dead bodies? Okay. Killing? Monsters and vicious animals, all the time. Other ponies? Not as much as you like to, but yes. Even killing ponies is often and regrettably necessary."

Velvet Remedy had been a Stable Dweller like me. She grew up with the same morality I did. Only… she had always held to hers better than I had. The wasteland began to erode me from the first night out. Velvet's sense of right and wrong was made of sterner stuff than mine. And what she had seen in the basement was so far beyond what she could accept…

"But you treat having to kill them with respect. You bury them. Or, if you don't, you at least don't dance on them and urinate on their corpses. And you don't carve them up for *snacks.*"

"You do what you must to survive," Xenith intoned softly. It was the first thing she had said since the shooting started.

Velvet turned on her, eyes wide. "Are you seriously going to side against Littlepip on this with the argument of 'Cannibalism: Yay'?"

Unlike Velvet and Calamity, Xenith's voice only grew softer. "You cannot begin to understand what I let them do to me in order to survive. If they had put pony meat in front of me and told me to eat, I would have. It would not have been the worst thing I let them do. Not even that week."

Velvet took a stumbling step back from the dour zebra. Turning to Calamity, "They didn't just kill bandits, Calamity. You saw the head of the preacher pony. They had it mounted on their wall like a trophy! And if they murdered him, how many more?"

"Ah don't reckon Ah know," Calamity replied. "Point is, none o' y'all do either."

"They fed you the meat of ponies you killed. Probably fed you the heart of one of them…" Velvet Remedy continued.

"Ain't happy 'bout that."

"…and they've been selling it to merchants, spreading their filth across the whole wasteland." Velvet pointed a hoof towards the children clutching each other behind her. "And they have been indoctrinating a whole new generation to do the same…"

"Velvet…" I said softly. Too softly to be heard. Don't defend me, Velvet. You were right about me back in old Appleloosa. I'm a murderer. A monster drowning in the blood of all the ponies I have killed. I'm the thing in the mirror, no better than a raider.

Except… I wasn't, was I? These were *bad ponies.* They needed to die. I was saving ponies by wiping them out, wasn't I?

Corrupted Kindness, the little pony in my head said angrily.

"Arbu wasn't a town full of ponies," Velvet Remedy asserted. "It was a cancer that needed to be destroyed before it could spread any further."

"Velvet?" I said again, a little louder. Calamity was staring at her in silence.

Neighing loudly, Velvet exclaimed. "Arbu was mutated flesh that had to be cut away in order for the wasteland to even begin to heal."

"Velvet… you're scaring the children." My voice was soft, but just loud enough for her to hear. The beautiful charcoal unicorn turned, aghast, tears forming in her eyes as she looked at the terrified expressions on the faces of the fillies and colts behind her.

I'm not corrupted kindness, I whimpered back at the mare in my mind. But I didn't believe it. Not anymore. Trixie had been right. Or I had made her right.

If you haven't found your own virtue yet, Monterey Jack had told me, *you best hurry up. While there's still anything left of you to save.*

Was there anything left of me to save?

You just slaughtered over twenty ponies, the little pony in my head responded. What do you think?

My head was splitting open. I realized I was crying.

Calamity turned to SteelHooves now. "What about you?"

"What about me?" SteelHooves responded laconically.

Calamity shook his head. "Is this… is there a way for me t' be okay wi' this? Ah want t' be okay with this… for Li'lpip… but…"

"Littlepip is our leader," SteelHooves replied. "It was her call."

"It was…?" Calamity blinked. His brow furrowed under his hat. "It…? Oh hells no!" The pegasus launched himself through the air, flying up to the Steel Ranger Outcast. SteelHooves stood his ground. The idea of Calamity intimidating the huge Ranger struck me as ludicrous.

"Yer the Elder of Applejack's Rangers now. Ya don't get t' play the good li'l soldier card anymore!" Calamity informed him. "Tell me, what would Applejack think o' all this?"

SteelHooves' deep voice rumbled dangerously, "Applejack was a farmer. What she didn't put into her friends and trying to save ponies, she put into her apples. She understood the need to get rid of bad apples. And I think she would be repulsed beyond the telling of it to see ponies eating other ponies."

Calamity flapped his wings, moving back a pony's length. "But… t' kill 'em all?"

SteelHooves whinnied. "She wouldn't have done that, no. But she had other options. She would have had them all arrested. Rounded up and carted off to the Ministry of Peace, where they could be *fixed.*"

Calamity nodded. "But… that's kinda muh point. Li'lpip had options. She coulda come t' us. Why didn't she come t' us first?"

I was hating how Calamity was talking about me like I wasn't there. Like he couldn't bear to acknowledge me. But then… did I deserve better? Would I have been able to look at him, if he had just done the same thing?

"She was enraged. She was *not* thinking clearly," SteelHooves informed Calamity bluntly. "The only thing she's done wrong here is that she let her anger control her. Is that what you need to hear, Calamity? Then yes, I don't approve. I would prefer she had killed these monsters with cold-blooded calculation."

SteelHooves was right. Calamity was right. I had totally lost it.

But… they were bad ponies. They were *horrible* ponies. They deserved it!

All of them? the little pony challenged. *Even the young ones?*

I tried to save the young ones! I rescued them! But I had traumatized them in the process. Was what I had done any better than what the raiders did to Silver Bell?

Still, I'd only killed the responsible ones, the adults…

The mare in my mind spit back at me, asking: *what about the young mare in the clinic?*

My mind swam. I was still having trouble remembering everything that had happened. It was like trying to put together a puzzle while gagged, I couldn't hold the pieces in my hooves and they kept slipping away.

Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt. Pffatt.

I remembered that much. Two three-round bursts. One into the mother, one into the father. I… I *hadn't* killed the young mare.

Are you sure about that? My little pony was quick to point out: *she's not here amongst the living, is she? Are you sure you didn't choke her to death? Were you even paying that much attention?*

I… I didn't… couldn't have… did I?

And even if I didn't, what had I done? I'd left her laying unconscious next to the burning bodies of her murdered parents. So much less evil, Littlepip.

I was evil.

But she wasn't a filly, I thought desperately, clinging to any illusion I could keep. She had her cutie mark already.

Stable-think, the mare in my mind chided. *You were older when you got yours.*

She had her Arbu mark. She'd killed and eaten…

How do you know her kill wasn't a damned radigator? my little pony spat.

She was a guard! The rifle under the table proved that. The Arbu ponies had guests in town. Guests they weren't going to kill. So they had guards. Protecting their dark secret. Ready to kill to defend it. She was one of them. She knew what the town was doing, and that it was wrong, and she was still protecting it.

The little pony in my head shut up at that. For what absolutely little it was worth, I had scored a point.

"Go up to my room," a voice said beside me. Grandpa Rattle had walked up to me at some point and I hadn't even noticed. I felt like I was missing time. "There's a safe under my bed. Fetch the book inside. I know you can pick a lock."

I turned to him. It was like he was forever away. I had the sudden sense that I was drowning in all this air around me. "What's in the book?"

"It's my ledger. E'ry pony they killed. E'ry pony they et."

Velvet Remedy had heard him. "Why?" she asked softly. "Why would you keep a record of something like that?"

"Cuz I knew this day was comin'," Grandpa Rattle replied. "An' my mind ain't what it used t' be. Particularly in daytime."

Velvet Remedy closed her eyes. A tear reflected the light of her shield spell as it trickled down her cheek.

"I didn't figure it would be folks like you, though," Grandpa Rattle added. "Actually," he said, pointing at SteelHooves, "I figured it would be him."

* * *

I found myself in Grandpa Rattle's loft, staring at his bed. At the scuff marks on the floor. At the iron shackles that had been used to bind the old man to his bed.

I remembered running through the fire in Custard's Cakes and galloping up the stairs. I lost my balance twice on the steps, feeling dizzy. I blamed the headache and the smoke. The loft was filled with smoke, forcing me to press against the hot floor. The heat was oppressive. But the fire wasn't spreading up the stairs. The ceiling of the bakery below wasn't catching the flames.

I coughed, trying to open the lock on the safe. But it was impossible. My mind just couldn't grasp the image of the tumblers. Every time I tried, my thoughts got jumbled, fell apart. My headache was like a railroad spike being hammered into my skull.

I floated out my screwdriver and a bobby pin. I would have to do this the old way…

…It was too hard. The lock was ridiculously difficult. Or I was just too messed up to function. After breaking four bobby pins, I gave up. I just laid there on the hot floor, coughing and hacking, trying to still my head. The coolness of the water talismans was washing over me, buffeting against the heat, keeping the room bearable.

Why didn't you go to your friends first? The pony in my head would not let me rest.

I don't know, I told her.

Why didn't you talk to Grandpa Rattle? You could have gotten this ledger. You could have known for sure.

But I did know. I had seen… enough.

I had killed for these monsters. The Steel Rangers… those poor ponies up at Bucklyn Cross… they didn't have to die. They didn't deserve to die. Not for Arbu. Especially not for Arbu.

More memories came back. I could remember gunning down the milk-colored, one-eyed pony now. "We helped you!" she screamed at me as she dropped her shotgun, having run out of bullets. My mind flashed back to the Ponyville Bridge. Had I not said the same thing to Monterey Jack?

You've never been forced to give up your principles for the greater good. To sacrifice yourself and become a monster because it was the right thing to do.

Red Eyes was no longer my dark and twisted reflection… he *was* my reflection. I was a monster. I hadn't even been forced. I did it because I was mad. If anything, he was better than me.

No.

No, I wouldn't let it be like this. I wouldn't let myself become this. I had made a… mistake. A horrible, evil mistake. But this wasn't me. I was better than this, and I still could be. I had to find a way to make this right. To fix this.

You can't fix dead.

No. But I could spend my entire life doing everything I could to make up for it. I would…

I was Corrupted Kindness… but I could be more than that, couldn't I? Was it possible for a messed up pony to have a True Virtue as well?

Yes, a voice in my head insisted. My memories flashed to out last visit to New Appleloosa. To Silver Bell seeing Pyrelight, her eyes going wide with wonder as if suddenly a whole world had opened up to her. A world of beauty.

That voice out of nowhere *(It was under 'E'!)* took on a filly's tone: *I never felt joy like that before. It felt so good I just wanted to keep smiling forever.*

And suddenly, part of me knew, knew for sure…

Call me crazy, but after we go, Ah half expect that filly t' spend the next few days tryin' t' make New Appleloosa as pretty as that bird.

…that in that moment, Silver Bell had found her virtue. A real one, pure and true. And if the pony who had epitomized corrupted laughter could also be something greater, then so could I.

My headache had faded. I glanced towards the window. The sky was getting lighter. Dawn was almost here. I'd been in this room for hours. How? How had I lost so much time?

I pulled out another bobby pin. This time, I got the lock open. It wasn't nearly as hard as it had been when I first tried it.

* * *

"Howdy, children! This is your favorite voice of the airwaves, DJ Pon3, bringing you the news!

"First up, a warning to travelers. The fires in Everfree Forest are creating a major travel hazard from Splendid Valley to New Appleloosa. And I'm not just talking 'bout the air quality, although considerin' some of the things burning up in that place, that might be a righteous concern. No, I've got reports of some truly fearsome monsters that have been driven from the forest. Caravans are cautioned to steer clear of the whole region until further notice.

"And now for a little something different.

"Mail pony dropped ol' DJ Pon3 a letter today. Written from our dear Ditzy Doo out in New Appleloosa. Love that gal. Well, she was listenin' to the two reports I made regarding the Stable Dweller and the news out of Arbu… and she wasted no

time in weighing in. Here's what she has to say about the Stable Dweller:

"I've seen her get raging mad. At what the raiders in Ponyville did to me. And to a filly. And to so many others. She saw, she went crazy, she pulled out her gun, and she started saving ponies.

"I was one of those ponies. Maybe you too. The bullets she fired are still saving ponies today, because those raiders aren't around anymore.

"I bet she saved a whole lot of ponies in Arbu.

"PS: Yummy, yummy muffins! Homage is awesome! Xenith is awesome! Littlepip is awesome! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

* * *

"Took you long 'nuff," Grandpa Rattle grumped as I returned with his ledger. "Fall asleep in there?"

I set it down before him. "I… don't know."

"Well, I ain't got all day!" he snapped, floating the ledger up. "Dawn's almost here. Won't be lucid much longer."

Velvet Remedy was curled up with the children, singing a soft lullaby. She'd gotten most of them to sleep. At the elderly buck's words, she stopped singing, turning to him. "What do you mean?"

Grandpa Rattle looked to her without a trace of shame, as if he was too old and too weathered to be embarrassed about what he was saying anymore. "Told ya, my mind ain't what it used to be. I've been Kissed by Luna since I was old 'nuff to have a cutie mark, but that don't help come dawn."

"Kissed by Luna?" I asked, my actions apparently having not killed my curiosity.

Grandpa Rattle regarded me. "That's right. Means I'm clearer headed and more perceptive at night. A blessing from the Goddess. Recent years, means the nighttime staves off the dementia."

The old buck floated the ledger in front of Calamity. "Well, ya gonna read it or not?"

The rust-colored pegasus looked at the book floating in front of him. Then shook his head, pushing it away. The book broke out of Rattle's levitation bubble, thumping to the ground.

"Ah don't need to," Calamity said walking past Grandpa Rattle and up to me, staring at me. "Ya did wrong, Li'lpip."

"Says the pony who shot her because he thought she was a raider," Velvet Remedy whispered.

"Don't matter what that book says," he continued. "Ya lost control."

"I know," I said softly.

Calamity lunged at me. I stiffened, too startled to react. He grabbed me, crushing me. I tried to fight back, but he was bigger, stronger…

He was… hugging me?

"Ah've seen yer heart, Li'lpip," Calamity reminded me, clutching me tight. "Ah know yer a good pony. Maybe the best pony Ah've ever met." I felt his tears. "An' if that heart cries out in pain an' rage an' fury, then Ah've got t' believe it's fer good reason. An' that Ah'm just too jaded t' see it."

* * *

The early morning breeze washed through the *Sky Bandit.* Six children, one young buck and Grandpa Rattle all accompanied us, scattered about on the benches of the passenger wagon. This was the second time in two hundred years that it had felt full, even though there were still plenty of empty benches.

Velvet Remedy had been nothing less than amazing in getting the foals to come along with us. We were taking them to Friendship City, someplace they could be safe. Surely, a place called Friendship would take them in. And if they needed persuading, I had a water talisman to offer.

Now Velvet Remedy's attention was on me. Her horn was glowing as she looked into my eyes.

"If it would make you feel any better to claim temporary brain damage, I could probably give you a doctor's note," Velvet chided. "Your concussion was less than sixteen hours ago, and what you've done since is pretty much the *opposite* of rest."

"It's at least three days' flight to Canterlot," I reasoned. "I'll rest on the way." My headache was back, although not as bad as before. I hadn't been able to eat. But I really didn't want to. I wasn't sure I could ever eat again. I would never put meat in my mouth for as long as I lived.

Velvet nuzzled me softly. "But you shouldn't. Need to excuse yourself, I mean. You… you didn't do anything wrong." She took my face in her hooves and made me look into her eyes. "I know you, Littlepip. I can see that you've been bucking yourself to pieces about this ever since it happened. Possibly even while it was happening. You're not a monster. You're not a villain. You're a mare who loves ponies and cares about them, and who had finally seen too many hurt too badly to stand it anymore. Goddesses, if we were only all like you."

"Velvet?" Something in her voice worried me.

She looked down, dipping her horn. "If anypony is a monster here, Littlepip, it is me."

"What? No. That's…"

"Yesterday, you killed a bunch of ponies who were murdering and eating other ponies," she said softly, a tone of real sorrow in her voice. "Yesterday, I put the life of my pet above the life of a pony."

I shook my head quickly. And now it was my turn to make her look into my eyes. "You put the life of a beloved member of our group, a thinking and feeling creature, above the life of the pony who shot her."

Velvet Remedy gave me a wet, grateful look, but said nothing.

"What are these marks?" SteelHooves asked Grandpa Rattle. Calamity may have neglected the ledger, but the leader of Applejack's Rangers was giving it a close inspection.

"Say what now?" Grandpa Rattle asked. "Hey! How'd ya git my ledger!"

"You gave it to me," SteelHooves said evenly, patiently.

"Oh." He looked around. "We're leavin' Arbu, ain't we?" This was not the first time Rattle had seemed surprised at the change in his surroundings.

"Yes, SteelHooves said. "Now, if you please, what are these marks."

Grandpa Rattle peered at the ledger. "That there's how many times I warned folks off before the others kilt ’em. One mark fer each time I told ’em I have a shotgun.”

“I see.”

“For him to keep such records of his attempt to help,” Xenith leaned close, whispering to me, “I suspect he was not expecting rescue at all. He was preparing his defense.”

Grandpa Rattle turned his appraising gaze to SteelHooves. “Yer him, ain’tcha?”

SteelHooves looked up from the ledger. “Excuse me?”

“Yer Paladin SteelHooves!” he exclaimed. “I remember ya! Yer that ghoul my daughter kept lustin’ after.”

Velvet Remedy’s ears perked. I stifled a laugh. SteelHooves nickered and tried to turn his attention back to the ledger.

“You must be mistaken.”

“No, yer just none too perceptive,” Grandpa Rattle insisted. “Never knew she was even there. Always pinin’ for Applejack.”

SteelHooves looked up abruptly. “Do I know you?”

“Scribe Rattle.” Grandpa Rattle paused. “Former. Left after my daughter got pregnant.” At SteelHooves’ quick stomp, Rattle swiftly added, “Not yers! With that buck what’s-his-mane from Arbu…”

SteelHooves cocked his head slowly. “Scribe Rattle. Transformations magic. Abandoned the Rangers after your daughter was disgraced. I remember now.”

Grandpa Rattle’s expression darkened, but he nodded.

“You knew transformation magic?” Xenith asked.

“Yep. Steel Rangers was tryin’ to figger out a spell to turn Steel Rangers armor inta clothing and back. Wouldn’t work, I told ’em. Armor’s already fulla spells.” He looked suddenly eager. “I can change yer rifle inta a stick if ya’d like.”

I’ve got a shotgun.

“I do not have a rifle,” Xenith pointed out.

“Oh.” Turning to me, “How ’bout you?”

“Can you change it back?” I asked.

“uh… no.”

He had a stick.

Looking past him, my eyes caught those of the young buck I had pulled out of Java’s Cup. The young buck had been staring at me silently since laying down on one of the *Sky Bandit’s* benches at the start of the trip.

You have no Arbu mark? I recalled asking him, my heart almost giddy with relief.

No, he had told me backed into the corner of his room. *Last week, I was supposed to kill a mare and eat her heart, but… I couldn’t. I’m sorry, I know I was supposed to, and Daddy was furious. He…* Then his expression changed a flash of insight. *You killed daddy, didn’t you?*

There had been such an odd look in his eyes. It wasn’t blame. It was… resignation.

Now, for the first time since then, he spoke. “What happened to Clearglass?”

It took me a moment to realize he was talking about the only other pony in Arbu of similar age,the young mare guard. The mare I hadn’t intended to kill… but who I was sure now that I had choked to death without even thinking. I cringed, looking for words.

“I killed her.” The voice wasn’t mine. I turned, looking at SteelHooves in surprise.

“Comin’ up on Friendship City!” Calamity called out before anything more could be said.

"This time, let me do the talking," Velvet Remedy said to SteelHooves. "Your diplomacy leaves a lot to be desired." The ghoul nodded wordlessly. The events of the night before were weighing heavily on him. And for him, Arbu was not the heaviest burden.

I got up, steadying myself as I was hit with an odd dizziness. It passed and I moved to the window, staring out at the Pony of Friendship, a huge statue made of greened metal that stared out over the Manehattan harbor. Living inside that metal structure surrounded by water was an entire town of ponies. I could see lights pouring out of tiny holes where the metal had rusted through. Friendship City.

* * *

I was thrown against one of the passenger wagon's benches as Calamity banked a hard left, dodging the shot.

"I can't believe Friendship City is shooting at us!" I cried out.

Smaller pops were followed by a massive crack of thunder below us. An explosion of black smoke and flame burst in the air a dozen yards away. The rifle ponies firing from the crown windows of the Pony of Friendship were not much of a threat, but the shells from the harbor artillery were a whole different matter!

"You haven't been listening to the radio, have you?" SteelHooves rumbled. "Your friend DJ Pon3 has had some unpleasant things to say about the massacre of Arbu."

"WHAT?!"

Another shell burst in the air. Calamity veered harshly, throwing me again. Velvet put her shield up around the children to keep them from getting tossed. "We can't land here," Calamity shouted. "Ah've got t' head back!"

"Sounds like one of those two Rangers you let go at Bucklyn Cross reported Arbu in the worst possible light," SteelHooves informed me bitterly.

I was dying inside. Homage… oh Goddesses, what did Homage think of me? Did she hate me?

"I have them recorded if you would like to listen later."

I wanted to gallop to her. To order Calamity to head to Tenpony Tower straight away. But…

But I couldn't. I had already delayed far too long. We needed to go to Canterlot. To deal with the Goddess. And to turn our attention to Red Eye. Right now, thousands of ponies were in danger just from Red Eye's threat alone, and I was surely already testing his patience.

I remembered thinking, in that one brief moment of memory I had kept for myself from the Helpinghoof Clinic in Tenpony, *it was the only way to make sure Red Eye listened.* I had communicated with Red Eye somehow. Presumably through somepony or griffin in his encampment. I hoped that I had been convincing him that I had a plan and that I just needed time. A lot of time.

More importantly, Homage needed the truth. Truth she could trust in. And I was the last pony to be able to give her that. She needed to learn what had happened from a source that was not as biased as I was.

If she learned the truth, it couldn't be from me. Anything from me would be tainted. And if she did not… or worse, if she did and hated me for it…

It would kill me. But like a ghoul, I would keep going anyway. If I lost Homage, I was losing something I didn't deserve. And if the whole wasteland turned against me. If everypony feared and hated me, it wouldn't stop me from trying to make Equestria a better place. Even if it meant that I would forever be seen as the villain of the piece.

Calamity flew us away from Friendship City.

* * *

We waited an hour after landing in the Manehattan Ruins, then worked our way towards the harbor on hoof. The rest of us stayed behind, watching from an observation platform, as Velvet Remedy lead the survivors out onto Friendship Bridge. Her horn was glowing. Behind her floated Elder Cottage Cheese's life support capsule. Pyrelight perched on top, enjoying the ride.

Friendship Bridge was a drawbridge that had once extended all the way from Manehattan to the island. I was astounded how close to intact it still was. There were gaps, but none looked longer than a hundred yards, and there were rope bridges spanning the collapsed sections.

"How did they do that?" I mused, staring at the extensive rope bridges through my binoculars. It seemed like an incredible feat even for unicorn magic. Calamity tapped my shoulder, then grinned and fluttered his wings.

"Oh. Duh." At some point, Friendship City had become home to at least one Dashite.

Through my binoculars, I could see that the ponies of Friendship City had fouled the Manehattan half of the lifting bridge, locking it flat, and had re-engineered their half so that only they could control it. As I watched, Velvet Remedy, Grandpa Rattle and the children approached the far end on the Manehattan side.

It had to be Velvet, and it had to be her alone. DJ Pon3's warning had painted Xenith and Calamity as signs of danger. And only Velvet Remedy had the diplomatic skills to talk the ponies of Friendship City into letting the survivors in.

Well, not exactly alone. She had Pyrelight. I was suddenly reminded of how much solace Pyrelight had given me in Fillydelphia.

In the crumbling ruins of the building behind us, Xenith was talking softly with SteelHooves as she built a cookfire.

"You were swift to condemn those who eat the meat of other ponies," she said softly.

"I am a ghoul," he replied.

"And I am a zebra," she responded. "And, like the medical pony, a vegetarian. Yet you took greater offense to the survival tactics of Arbu than I did. Why is that?"

"Zombies eat the flesh of ponies. Because they are monsters."

The zebra nodded sagely. "I see."

We watched. And waited. They were far away, but I thought I could see Velvet Remedy lifting her hoof. There was, I had been told, an intercom that would allow her to speak to the guards on the island. If they were willing to listen.

SteelHooves moved up next to me and sat down. "Calamity, mind if I talk to Littlepip alone?"

Calamity looked at him for a moment, then nodded and flew off to where Xenith was cooking. I looked to SteelHooves nervously.

"Clearglass?" I asked slowly.

"You sent a merchant pony, an innocent, into a basement – a place where he could be easily cornered – even though you had left one of the guards alive," he responded. "Us as well. It was the sort of tactical error you wouldn't have made if you were thinking clearly." He looked at me. "That is how I knew you were not."

I closed my eyes and looked away.

"Take the pain slowly," he told me solemnly, "What you became last night is going to hurt you for the rest of your life."

I nodded. Part of me wanted to cry, but I would not let myself because the tears would have been for me. And I didn't deserve them. The ponies of Arbu didn't deserve them either. As much as my actions horrified me, showing me the monster I could and briefly did become, there was no question that Arbu needed to be… purged. Just like any pit of raiders or band of slavers. If anypony deserved my tears, it was those whom I had saved. The night had cut a deep wound in me, an abscess carved in my soul by a blade of my own wielding. That great hollowness festered with despair and self-loathing, but I was slowly filling it with determination.

SteelHooves stared out over the harbor. "I need to thank you, Littlepip."

"For what?"

"For failing," SteelHooves said, surprising me. "All this time, you have been somepony to look up to. You have made me want to be a better pony. But at the same time… you were *too* good." He looked at me. "You were an impossible standard. Tonight, you have made it easier for me to live with myself."

I just stared. My heart twisted, unsure how to feel. A drop of rain hit my horn. Another splashed against my nose.

SteelHooves turned away, staring out across the harbor again as the rain began to fall. Eventually I did too. Raising my binoculars, I caught Pyrelight flying towards the island, carrying something. The ledger, I knew.

* * *

"Good evening!

"This is DJ Pon3, and have I got news for you! Major update on the situation at Arbu and Bucklyn Cross. My associate spent the last few hours talkin' with a merchant who was at Arbu and saw much of what went down.

"First and foremost, let me say hallelujah! Sounds like our Wasteland Savior hasn't fallen to the darkness after all. Maybe stumbled a bit, but listen t' this:

"The ponies of Arbu were cannibals, folks. That's right. They ate ponies! And as if that wasn't sick enough, they've been sellin' pony meat, claimin' it was radigator meat. Eaten a radigator kabob lately? You sure about that? Great Goddesses, and I thought I'd seen all the fucked-up shit this wasteland had to serve up.

"Well, turns out our Stable Dweller discovered the truth. Unfortunately, here's where things get sketchy. See, when our heroine showed the merchant what she had discovered, the good pony hightailed it out of there and didn't look back.

> *"But what the merchant could tell us is that before this shit went down, the ponies of Arbu were treating our heroine to a meal and a place to sleep, and yes children, you guessed what was on the menu. But before she knew the truth, our heroine tried to help the ponies of Arbu. She went to Bucklyn Cross to negotiate for clean, purified water for the town. And the Rangers on that broken bridge started firing on our heroine before she even got into shoutin' range. According to the merchant, it was quite the light show.*
>
> *"I don't know about you, children, but that gives me new suspicions about what happened at Bucklyn Cross, and it puts some serious questions to the witness from Bucklyn Cross who first reported the events at Arbu.*
>
> *"I'll let you know more as soon as I do, children. But for now, I think we can all breathe one hell of a sigh of relief.*
>
> *"And now, it's Sweetie Belle, singing about that one great truth of the wasteland…"*

* * *

It rained for the next two days straight. Water was still falling from the sky in sheets as we flew over the foothills that slowly climbed up towards the base of the mountains. Dark cliffs shot up abruptly to loom over the landscape. Somewhere up there, obfuscated by the rain, were the ruins of Canterlot, the former capital city of Equestria.

We were all soaked to the bone, but Calamity had suffered the most by far.

I shivered from the cold. My armored Stable utility barding was pasted to me like a second skin, the fur of my coat trapped between it and my real skin in a most unpleasant way. But still, I was better off than I had been in days. This morning was the first that I had been without headaches. For the first time in days, I felt I was actually thinking clearly.

Velvet Remedy proclaimed my concussion gone. But still wanted me to rest. I'd been doing nothing but resting since she had returned from Friendship Bridge. Alone, save for Pyrelight. Friendship City had proven good to its name and taken in the refugees from Arbu, and Cottage Cheese as well. They hadn't asked for any payment, any compensation. They just wanted to help. The way ponies were supposed to.

I had sent Pyrelight to them with one of the water talismans. Not as payment, but as a gift.

The other water talisman was now safely installed in Stable Twenty-Nine. Star Paladin Crossroads had been talking about rebooting the Crusader when we left. With the override codes, Cross was convinced they could rewrite the Crusader's programming, turning it into an obedient and beneficial custodian.

She still hadn't decided what to do about Bucklyn Cross. SteelHooves gave her some advice, but left the decision up to her. I believe his diplomatic failure had left him wanting to distance himself from that place.

I stared at my forehooves. As we approached Canterlot, a new concern had pushed its way into my mind: my PipBuck. We were supposed to take everything off before we entered. Our armor, our saddlebags… I was supposed to float it all.

But you couldn't float a PipBuck. Well, you could, but all you would have is a fancy radio. It had to be attached for the E.F.S. and S.A.T.S. to work, not to mention the medical assistance and automapping. I could take it off. I had the tools. But without it, I would be at a fraction of my usefulness in the most dangerous place we had ever set hoof into. Could I do that? Was it right to expose my friends to even more danger because I might otherwise be forever bonded with… well, with my cutie mark?

"Keep yer eyes peeled fer a safe place t' put down fer the night!" Calamity called back over the roar of the rain. To be honest, none of us were as concerned about safe as we were about dry.

We all moved to the windows. I lifted my binoculars, but they did little good. They just made the grey of the rain closer.

Suddenly, SteelHooves galloped to the front of the *Sky Bandit.* A moment later, he turned to me. "Littlepip, can you get me on the roof?"

"Can you stay on the roof?" Velvet asked, concerned. "Even with the mounting?"

"What's wrong?" I asked even as I kicked on my E.F.S. and answered my own question. With my targeting spell, I could recognize several hostile targets, at least a dozen, all airborne. And… three friendly ones on the ground. In the second it took me to count, one of the red marks passed over the one of the friendly lights and extinguished it. Now there were only two.

"Calamity!" I shouted as I drew out my sniper rifle. "Get us as close as you can! We need to see what we're shooting at!"

Floating up the sniper rifle, I slid into S.A.T.S. and took aim at a shadowy, flying figure I could not clearly see. The targeting spell, however, didn't give a damn about the rain. And my E.F.S. was quick to identify the targets.

Bloodwings. A whole damn flock of them. Attacking two fleeing figures on the ground who, as best I could tell, were completely unarmed.

I opened fire, determined not to allow that number to drop any further.

* * *

"Hello out there? Anypony awake? It's time for a special late night edition of the news!

I have with me, communicating over broadcaster, one Grandpa Rattle, long-time resident of Arbu and new citizen of Friendship City. And he's here to set the record straight. The whole pony about what went down three nights ago. So sit down and hold onto your hats, children, because this is going to be a hell of a story.

"But first, I have something that I have to say. And this goes out from me to that Heroine of the Wasteland, our little Bringer of Light:

"I'm sorry.

"When you've seen as much as I have, when you see as many heroes fail and fall… it's hard not to expect it. It's hard to keep believing. Even when you know there's somepony out there you should believe in.

"You didn't fail us, Stable Dweller. I failed you. And you have my deepest and sincerest…

"A particular toaster repair-pony once told me that she would always be tuned in, listenin' to my message of hope. Well, listen close, Stable Dweller, cuz this is the

honest truth, straight from me to you:

"That message of hope? That's you. You are my message.

"Now then Grandpa Rattle, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself and this book you want to share with us tonight?"

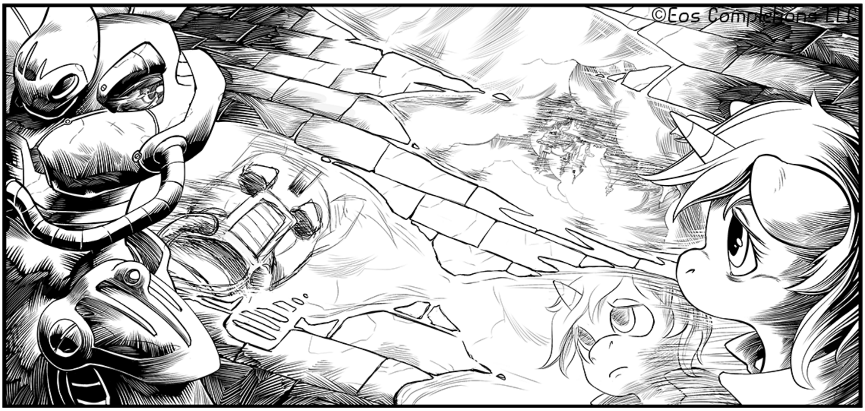
…

"Ain't a book. It's a ledger. A recordin' of every sick thing the ponies in Arbu did. By the time I'm done readin' two pages, I gare-un-tee every one of y'all will wish ya coulda been there to do what that little mare did fer ya…"

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Very Strange Tale of Midnight Shower



"I got shit make you horny, make your mare horny, make you hard, make you happy, make you strong, make you smart… and, of course, I got THE drug, the shit that'll make you FLY… Dash."

BLAM!

The bloodwing screeched as the bullet from my sniper rifle tore through its abdomen. The dark shadow tucked in its wings, spiraling downward, disappearing in the storm.

Sheets of rain lashed across the *Sky Bandit.* I was relying more on S.A.T.S. than on my own vision. Above us, SteelHooves was doing the same. The rhythmic booming of his grenade machine gun and the shrieks of the bloodwings filled the air.

"Where the hell did they all come from?" Calamity shouted, firing the twin guns of his battle saddle as the dark form of one of the giant bats swooped up in front of us. There were far more than the dozen I had originally counted. It was a whole damned flock.

I heard the thud as one of them landed on SteelHooves above, biting at his armor in a futile effort to pierce it. Another swirled up out of the rain and slammed into the side of the *Sky Bandit,* rocking it, sending me tumbling backwards off the bench I had perched on. My sniper rifle clattered to the ground.

Green flame erupted across the side of the *Sky Bandit;* the burning bloodwing let out an ear-splitting screech of agony and fell away as the heavy rain washed away the flames. Pyrelight flashed through the air, piercing the air with a battle cry as she dove after it. I blinked, struck by the impression that the balefire phoenix had a vengeful hatred for the creatures.

Another bloodwing latched itself onto the opposite side of the passenger wagon, viciously thrusting its head into the windows, gnashing at us. Velvet Remedy's combat shotgun roared, and I was splattered with what had been inside the creature's head.

As Xenith knocked the body of the bloodwing away, I threw myself to my hooves, leaving the sniper rifle and drawing out Little Macintosh. We were in the thick of them now. And Applejack's trusty little revolver was the fastest and most powerful weapon I had. For a moment, I felt bad for our zebra; her fighting style was useless in this situation.

I leapt to the window, slipping into S.A.T.S. and taking aim at the first dark shadow I saw.

BLAM! BLAM!

The first shot went through the bloodwing's back. The second tore a hole in its left wing. It fell from the sky only for another to take its place, lunging towards my window.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

The creature's momentum carried its body into the side of the *Sky Bandit* with a meaty thump. I heard the impact of meat on metal and a tearing sound. The black mass of two bloodwings tumbled into the drenched air behind us, SteelHooves entangled between them as they fell, disappearing into the torrential downpour.

I cried out, throwing out a telekinetic net, but he was gone. And a second later several more bloodwings were swirling about us. One of them was engulfed in green flame from beneath.

A few yards back, Xenith kicked open the door to the passenger wagon, staring out at the black forms whipping about us in the blankets of rain. Before I realized what she was planning, the zebra leapt, soaring out into the air and landing on the back of one of the giant bats. She drove the spear of her hellhound helmet through the monster's head, then jumped from its falling corpse towards the nearest opponent.

And I had felt sorry for her, I thought, watching as she impacted the creature's wing and slashed it off with her hellhound-claw horn before falling into the darkness where more unsuspecting bloodwings awaited. I should feel sorry for her enemies.

A giant bat dove onto Calamity, its huge wings dwarfing his own. I spun, targeting, and fired.

BLAM! *click click*

Little Macintosh's remaining bullet tore into the monster. It squealed. Calamity tried to buck it off, but the bat sank its huge, razor-sharp fangs into the pegasus. Calamity screamed.

Velvet Remedy galloped past me, firing repeatedly with her combat shotgun, tearing the monster to pieces before it could drink. The *Sky Bandit* lurched in the air. Calamity was hurt badly, and the ripped corpse of the giant bat was still latched onto him. But he was not dead.

A moment later, I saw how horribly close he had come to dying. The *Sky Bandit* dropped, jolting with turbulence as Calamity fought to land. The ground came into view, and I could see the two figures we had rushed in to save. Two young zebras, no older than the young mare with the Arbu mark, Clearglass. As I reloaded, a Bloodwing dropped on one of the zebras, knocking her to the ground. I tried to move faster, but it took only a second. The monster plunged its fangs into the zebra's side and drank. The zebra withered into a desiccated husk faster than her brain could die.

"No! Dammit no!"

I howled. Snapping Little Macintosh shut, I targeted the monster with S.A.T.S. as it cavorted over its kill. But the bloodwing was torn apart by a charging Xenith before I could pull the trigger.

* * *

"I do not understand," Xenith said. "Why were the three of you traveling such dangerous hills? And in such a storm?"

We were huddled under the glittering dome of Velvet Remedy's shield spell. I watched as barrels of rain cascaded down over the barrier of light, struck by the strange beauty of it.

The surviving young zebra had been dried by repeated use of Velvet's cleaning spell, as had we all, and was wrapped in a blanket from our supplies (which had needed similar de-drenching).

Xenith had built a fire and was sitting next to it, across from the other zebra, a pot of (purely vegetable!) soup beginning to bubble between them. The young zebra had just seen his two childhood friends die in a most horrible manner. He needed more than a blanket. I knew it wasn't much, but I had come to believe in the miraculous power of hugs.

Xenith, however, didn't hug. Xenith didn't touch unless it was to hurt something. Velvet Remedy was tending to Calamity's wounds, using her magic and Xenith's bleed-stopping goop to remove the fangs embedded in the pegasus' back safely before medical potions could be administered. None of us had seen any sign of our Applejack's Ranger. Getting up, I trotted over to the young zebra buck and lay down next to him.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "We… I should have been faster." I paused, unsure if suddenly embracing this strange zebra was the best thing for him after all. And, to my shame, a tiny part of my mind warned that I had been fooled into caring for evil folk before. I mentally dropped an anvil on that part of me, and then banished it to the moon.

Instead, I put a tender hoof on one of his, holding it gently. Just a simple touch. He started, looking first surprised, then grateful.

"We had to," he said at last. "We were too old." Looking at Xenith, he questioned, "You are not from Glyphmark?"

"Glyphmark?" Xenith asked. The younger zebra nodded. "I am sad to say I do not know of this place. This is a zebra village?"

"Whaddya mean, too old?" Calamity asked, grunting. He gritted his teeth as Velvet Remedy pulled the second fang free and quickly applied a hoof covered in Xenith's mixture to the flowing wound.

The zebra looked at us strangely. "Who are you ponies?"

"Friends," I answered gently.

He looked at me with suspicion. Then sadness. "My friends are dead." He turned to Xenith. "Quothe and Zuna had been my friends since we could walk. We did everything together. We even… we even got our marks together." He choked, tears forming in his young eyes. "W-we got k-kicked out of the t-t-tribe together…"

Now I hugged him. I held him and let him sob into my side.

* * *

The downpour finally relented, leaving a light drizzle in its wake. I looked into the sky, turning my gaze towards the mountains. There, nestled in the open jaw of a cliff, were the darkened spires of the Canterlot Ruins. We could be there in hours. But we were going the other way.

Velvet Remedy's beautiful voice rang across the hilltops:

"No more living in this gilded cage,
shackled to what is supposed to be.
"I am ready to exit this stage;
it is time for this bird to fly free."

Calamity cut in with perfect timing, his voice a pleasant counterpoint to the luxurious voice of the unicorn mare:

"Ah've been blinded cuz Ah've closed muh eyes,
seein' just what they told me t' see.
"Time t' get up an' shake off the lies; break their rules,
stretch muh wings and just leave!"

Together, they belted forth the chorus of their duet, their voices daring the slate grey sky and the ceaseless rain to even try to make the day gloomy.

I'd missed this.

We were trotting towards Glyphmark. Calamity flew alongside me, pulling the Sky Bandit no more than a pony's height above the ground. The mere idea of boarding the flying thing had driven the young zebra to panic. So we walked, escorting him towards his new home.

It was better this way anyway, I thought. I had been cooped up in that passenger wagon for days, recovering physically from my head trauma and psychologically from the most soul-destroying Worst Day Ever of my lifetime. Physically, I was healed. Mentally… I was capable of pushing on. What I had done would never heal.

The reality of that turned my thoughts to SteelHooves. Another reason for the walk. I had to trust he would find us. And when he did, it would be best if we were on the ground. Otherwise, he might shoot a missile to get our attention.

"Ah cannot hope to change things if Ah do not even try."
"I cannot heal another if I lay down and die."
"There's a whole world beneath us,"
"And a whole sky above…"

As the voices of Velvet Remedy and Calamity joined forces once more for the last line of the verse and another rousing chorus, I turned to my zebra companion. Xenith trotted along beside me, the young one between us.

"Do you still wish to seek out the tribe itself?"

"There is no need," Xenith intoned gravely. "My daughter is no longer with them."

The young zebra had wept openly, unable to stop once he had started. He had blubbered, sobbing and mourning the loss of his friends. And in the spaces between his words, I began to construct a picture of what had happened.

The trio of friends had come from the tribe that Xenith's daughter had been part of, the tribe that formed from those who were left behind when the slavers fell upon Xenith and her village. Zebra foals, all of them.

My parents and husband were slain in the fight, Xenith had told us. *My daughter was too young for Stern's slave pits and… she had no place in Red Eye's schools. So Stern left her there, along with the other children.*

An entire tribe of children. Living under the shared belief that being an adult meant being ripe for the slavers. That having adults in the tribe invited attack. And while the slavers would not take the children, that didn't mean that they wouldn't do much more horrible things to them.

"And jus' how do they decide when a zebra is suddenly too old?" Calamity had asked. The answer was obvious. It wasn't a matter of birthdays. It was a matter of maturity. You were too old when you got your mark.

Just like in Stable Two. When you got your cutie mark, you were an adult. And from that moment, you joined the work force. Only here, in this zebra tribe, it was a dreaded event.

I nodded to Xenith. She had suffered in the slave pits for many years since the attack on her village. Her daughter was young, but hardly an infant, and the zebra with us only vaguely recalled when the mare had herself been ostracized from the tribe.

"If she still lives, my daughter will be in Glyphmark."

* * *

Glyphmark… sucked.

I looked down the hill at the rows of sad, dilapidated shacks with their sunken roofing leading up to a half-collapsed building in a yard of junk. The whole town was surrounded by a wall of scrap that couldn't keep a radhog out. The ground was dark and lifeless mud. The hoof-full of zebras looked battered and dejected, their eyes downcast, their heads low, their manes and tails tangled and unkempt.

It looked like a town just waiting to die.

I could make out letters spelling "ANGEL" on the front of the ruined building, the last remaining word of a forgotten name. Whatever angel had once watched over this town, it had fallen.

As we approached, the zebras looked up fearfully. I saw two of them nudge a third forward. The mare stepped towards us. "We surrender! Just… just don't kill us," she called out. "We don't have anything… but take whatever you want!"

I could feel my barely mended heart breaking.

"This… is Glyphmark?" Xenith asked in a tone of disbelief.

The young zebra buck with us nodded, rocking slightly on his hooves, looking sucker-bucked.

Velvet Remedy trotted forward. "Hello," she said gently, her voice calming. "Do not be afraid. We mean no harm. We are just travelers who happened across a newly-marked buck and offered to help him make his way here safely in all the rain."

Conflicting emotions swam across the faces of the zebras. I could tell how desperate they were for the approaching strangers to intend no malice, yet how hard it was for them to believe it.

"Having brought him here, we will depart at once if you wish. Although I would ask your indulgence. We have trotted far, and seek a safe place to rest."

"Safe?" the zebra mare asked, her voice cracking with a bitter laugh. "Pony lady, there is no safe here. We are all just waiting for the slavers to come. The only question is whether the raiders or the monsters will have left any of us alive for them when they get here."

She waved us into the town anyway. With every step, the town got worse. Bleaker. As if despair and hopelessness had sunk into the very planks of the shacks like the Cloud and was radiating out of it.

"How do you survive here?" Velvet asked, her voice almost a whimper. I knew what she was seeing. There were no crops here. No gardens. The zebras were armed with crude spears and small, badly-maintained pistols that were no match for creatures like bloodwings. These were not hunters. Trappers of small game at best.

The zebras were all emaciated. I could see the shadow of their bones through their coats. They were all starving.

When Velvet put words to her observations, the nearest zebra responded, "Nothing grows here. This town is just close enough to Canterlot that the Cloud has poisoned the ground." At our looks of alarm, she added "But far enough away that it is not in the air anymore."

The zebra mare who had ushered us into the town explained, "The building up there was a laboratory for veterinary medicine…"

I was surprised by how educated she sounded. The tribe of children was far better off than those who they kicked out. But I had to wonder how long that could last. Without adults, there would be no replenishing of the tribe. In a few more years, the tribe wouldn't be a tribe anymore. Just one child telling another to go away.

"…There is an old hydroponics bay in the basement. Most of what they were growing down there is poisonous," the zebra mare stared at the ground and shuddered heavily. "We learned that the hard way. But we've been surviving on what was not, and what was left in the vender machines. But even that is almost gone now. I'm sorry, but we have nothing to feed you."

Velvet Remedy waved a hoof, "Banish the thought. We have some supplies. Let *us* feed *you.*"

I exchanged looks with Calamity, then nodded. Those supplies were meant to feed us while in Canterlot and on the trip back. But these zebras clearly needed them far more than we did. And, in comparison to me, they were far more deserving. None of them had slaughtered a whole town in a blind rage recently. And their suffering made mine look petty.

"Veterinary medicine?" Calamity questioned as we drew close to the building.

What had looked like scrap from a distance still looked like scrap up close. But it was clearly military scrap. Broken down military robots huddled around war chariots so rusted and decayed they were barely recognizable. Piles of empty ammo boxed littered one corner, as well as parts of several turret models. A much larger version of the flying contraption we had discovered in Old Olneigh was strewn across half the lot, upside down.

Stone pillars flanked the scant remains of a road leading into the yard around it. A cracked placard read "Angel Bunny Pharmaceuticals" – the name was not so forgotten after all. I remembered Xenith's claims that Fluttershy's pet rabbit had created the combat drug Stampede, and found myself wondering if the rabbit had somehow built this company. Then I facehoofed at my own foalishness. Knowing what I did of Fluttershy, it was the most natural thing for the Ministry of Peace to have a branch dedicated solely to the welfare of animals. And of course she would have it named after her favorite pet.

"The military took over," I surmised as I spotted the hulk of a sentinel robot. I wondered if part of this lab was repurposed for creating Stampede.

With a start, I realized that the poor zebras in this town were living under the shadow of Doom… bunny. The irony was so bitter I had to bite back a laugh.

"What about trade?" Calamity asked.

"No caravans stop here," the zebra mare told us. "There is nothing here that any pony wants, and we have nothing to buy supplies with."

Velvet Remedy gasped in horror as a zebra hobbled out of one of the shacks, teetering on only three legs. The remains of the fourth looked badly infected. "You… don't have a doctor either, do you?"

"Not anymore."

We made the full circle. There wasn't much of the town to see. Our host waved a forehoof. "Sleep wherever you want."

"Is this… all?" Xenith asked slowly as another zebra walked by, eyeing us curiously. I found myself staring; the zebra had used charcoal to outline her stripes so heavily that she looked like a black-coated zebra with white stripes rather than the reverse.

"Don't mind Gloom," our guide told us dismissively.

Xenith shook her head. "Are there no other zebras here?"

The zebra mare shook her head. The other zebra mare, Gloom, turned. "The Nightmare Moons took them. Six nights ago. They are all dead now. Wish I was."

"The… Nightmare Moons… took them?" I asked.

Our host nodded. "They came and took half of us. I do not know why. They have never paid any attention to us before."

Xenith looked pained. "Was one of the ones taken named Xephyr?"

The striped mare blinked at Xenith. "Yes." At Xenith's stricken expression, the other zebra turned away, looking instead to Velvet Remedy. "She was our doctor."

I pushed forward, catching the zebra mare's attention. "Which way did they go?"

* * *

"You do not have try to rescue them just because one of them is my daughter," Xenith said as I reloaded my guns. "Nor because you feel you need to make up for the cannibal town."

"No," I agreed, slipping Little Macintosh back into its holder. "We need to do this because it's the right thing to do."

"Ayep," Calamity agreed, trotting up next to us, clad in his Enclave armor minus the helmet. He'd spent a lot of his spare time since Old Olneigh juryrigging a way to fire the novasurge rifles without wearing the helmet. "Plus, Ah hate to say it, but this might be on us."

I stopped. What? I stared at Calamity.

"Ah reckon the Goddess ain't stupid," Calamity responded. "She's figured out she's got a blind spot, and she's… experimentin'."

This… this had to do with the memories I had stolen from myself, didn't it? "Well, if it wasn't settled before…"

"I'm going to stay."

I turned to Velvet in surprise. The unicorn shook her head. "These people need a doctor. Not when you come back with theirs, but now. It has been five days since the alicorns attacked Glyphmark, and that is five days too many."

I could see it in her eyes. She believed that *she* had something to make up for. And she wasn't going to turn away from another pony, or zebra, in need.

I stepped forward and gave her a hug. "Stay safe."

"I should be telling you that," she replied. Pyrelight landed on a rusty barrel next to us and hooted quizzically. Velvet gave the beautiful bird a nuzzle before saying, "Go with them, please, Pyrelight. Keep them safe." The bird nodded, giving a little salute with one of her wings.

Looking to Calamity, Velvet demanded, "Bring them all back without any new holes."

"Ah'll do muh best," he said, tipping his hat.

I released Velvet Remedy and turned towards Xenith and Calamity. "So, do either of you know anything about this place we're headed, Zebratown?" The answer from both of them was an unsurprising no. Once more, we were headed into the unknown.

* * *

It felt like it had been raining forever. I was panting as we ascended yet another hill, rethinking the wisdom of walking to Zebratown. Hearing that Zebratown was only an afternoon's trot away, Calamity had suggested we travel on hoof and I had agreed, suspecting the *Sky Bandit* would be too visible, and the alicorns would be looking for it.

Now I realized the idea of trotting back over these muddy hills with freed zebras in tow and possibly alicorns chasing us was just stupid.

I heard a whistle from the air above us. (Didn't help that Calamity wasn't exactly traveling on hoof.) Looking down, I saw another little valley with spots of asphalt indicating a nearly-vanished road. There was an ancient stone hut down there amongst collapsed sections of fence. The body of a dead bloodwing sprawled over the roof and a second was impaled on the iron struts of what, until recently, had been a windmill. A figure was galloping towards us from the door of the hut, clad in metal armor striped in Applejack red.

"Whole big ol' valley t' land in an' ya manage t' hit the *one* hut!" Calamity shouted to him, grinning.

I raced down the hill to meet him, Xenith following at a more reserved pace.

"Watch out," Calamity warned as I reached SteelHooves. "She's gotten huggy lately."

"I seem to recall it was you who hugged her," the Applejack's Ranger retorted, a welcome hint of good humor in his normally taciturn rumble.

Several minutes later, we stepped into the little two-room hut to get out of the continuing drizzle.

"Whoa," Calamity said, echoing my own sentiment as he came to a stop, rainwater dribbling off the brim of his black desperado hat.

I'd seen enough of the ravages of time and the scattered refuse that was left behind after generations of scavengers. This wasn't it. Pictures were slashed apart, furniture was smashed under hooves, small treasures were defiled.

I'd also seen the malicious destruction of raiders. The wreckage in the cottage was much closer to that, but this wreckage was old, bearing all the signs of predating the apocalypse. The torn pictures were so faded with age they were unintelligible. The furniture was rotting. The stuffing in the ripped pillows had turned to dust, presuming they were not stuffed with dust to begin with.

"It gets worse," SteelHooves warned. I stepped farther inside, and the turn of a corner revealed the collapsed remains of a skeleton on the floor beneath a hanging noose. Any physical clue as to whether the owner of that skeleton had hung himself or been lynched had been obliterated by the past.

Calamity kicked over a pile of broken chairs, then trotted into the kitchen to see if there was anything worth saddlebagging in the fridge. A minute later, I heard the pop and hiss of an opening cola bottle. Clearly, his search had born fruit.

I poked at a terminal laying amongst the rubble, its screen smashed in by a hoof. Then stopped, taking a closer look. It was one of those newer models I had been finding operational everywhere. And upon closer examination, the terminal was still running. Whoever destroyed it had fallen prey to the common yet silly misconception that breaking the screen had any effect on the device's spell matrix.

Calamity trotted back in, holding a Sunrise Sarsaparilla in his teeth and taking a swig.

I floated out a few tools and crouched next to the terminal.

SteelHooves regarded Calamity. "Are we on a date?"

Calamity spit his sarsaparilla, spraying it around the neck of the bottle as he choked. "What now?" he said, dropping the bottle, tears in his eyes.

I stopped what I was doing, stared, then collapsed in laughter. Served him right!

"I had assumed that you had seen the decoration on the roof and were coming to find me," SteelHooves noted, "But now I see you're all dressed up."

Beating at his armored chest with a hoof, the pegasus shook his head, coughing. Once he had his breath again, he answered, "Naw. We're headed on up t' Zebratown t' save a hoof-full of prisoners from alicorns." I noticed he didn't mention the prisoners were zebras. "So, ya with us, mighty alicorn hunter?"

I'd almost forgotten that title.

SteelHooves was strangely silent. I looked at him, wondering if I should be concerned. Was he thinking about Arbu again?

"Zebratown," SteelHooves voiced slowly.

"Ayep!"

"I would… rather not." There was an unpleasant tension in his voice. I looked at Xenith, who just shook her head sadly and walked back out into the rain.

"But I will." SteelHooves sounded greatly displeased. "It is what Applejack would have her Rangers do."

I nodded, feeling both sorrow and pride in our ghoul companion. I turned back to the terminal, connecting it to my PipBuck and running a quick diagnostic. My eyebrows shot up as I realized the terminal was safeguarded with some pretty heavy magical countermeasures. I was sure I could hack it, but the price of failure would be more than a simple lockout.

I turned away from the others and put my full focus on the terminal, hacking it through my PipBuck. After a few minutes, I had to back out and try again. I hadn't encountered a terminal with this level of security since the Ministry of Morale in Manehattan.

Now I was intensely curious. Why would the pony or zebra living in such a humble hut have need for a terminal with security that rivaled that of the Mare of the Ministry of Morale?

A few minutes later, I backed out again, just barely avoiding tripping the security spells embedded into the terminal. This was insane! The damn password was thirty characters long. The fuck!

I tried a third time. And a fourth. By my fifth try, I was beginning to suspect that the terminal only existed to frustrate the living hell out of me.

Xenith returned, several strips of leathery flesh from the bloodwings' wings dangling from her mouth. She shook, flinging water over the rest of us, then put the strips into her satchel, ignoring nasty looks from a dripping Calamity.

On my sixth attempt, I finally broke in. The password was "AstronomicalAstronomersAlmanac". I felt a brief flash of empathy with whoever put their hoof through the terminal screen. The terminal had not weathered the years well, far worse than most similar models, but that was to be expected with part of its innards exposed. Still, there were a number of files that I was able to download into my PipBuck, including several entries from a journal.

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day One:

Today is the first day of my mission-imposed exile from the refined walls of Canterlot. I arrived in Zebratown at the stroke of eight, the royal guards dropping me and my bags off a small trot from the city limits. I did not blame them for not wishing to travel closer. And with Celestia's sun shining above and a cool breeze coming off the mountains, the day invited a walk. My levitation spell is enough to care for my possessions for such a short distance and prevent the walk from being a burden. Although I admit I was a little concerned for the safety of the priceless heirloom with which I have been entrusted.

I would say that this is a fair town by Equestria's standards, but Zebratown does not hold itself to such standards at all, now does it? Still, it is far better than the complete hovel I expected. I had heard that there was a town somewhere out in the dirtier parts of Equestria that the earth ponies had built in merely a year. Well, if that is true, then maybe there is a little earth pony in the zebras (and I do not mean that in an offensive or seditious manner), for in just a few years they have *turned a poverty-riddled shantytown at the very foot of Canterlot into something rather impressive. Most impressive, I must say, is the elevated aqueduct that runs up the mountain and directly under Canterlot, catching the water which spills continuously from our glorious capital's moat and distributing it not only through the town but the farmland beyond.*

And to think that this entire place was not even a concept not so long ago. But then, there was no real need for segregation until the zebras massacred our children at Little Horn. Not that I believe the zebras who are upstanding Equestrian citizens should all be moved here, mind you. There are plenty of zebras in Canterlot. I even have a friend who is a zebra. But in the more backward, bumpkin parts of the kingdom, with the increasing anti-zebra war sentiment, it simply isn't safe for them to be amongst normal ponies. It really is better this way.

That said, I was pleased to learn that the hut which Princess Luna has provided for the duration of my research here is actually a few miles outside of the town proper. As for the hut itself, it is… cozy. Far from the refinements and luxuries I have been accustomed to in the castle; but I am a scholar, not a noble, and so I have it in my blood to make do, being unburdened as I am with the nobility's allergy to anything plebeian.

I have spent this afternoon getting settled in, including the task of troubleshooting the new terminal. Why is it that any new piece of arcano-technology always seems to come with more headaches than the one that it replaces? Of course, a fair part of the difficulties may have arisen from the installation of the security spell sub-matrix, but considering the sensitive nature of my research, it would simply not do to have one of the striped with an unhealthy sense of curiosity go poking around in my affairs, now would it?

Tomorrow, I shall trot back up to Zebratown and try to get acquainted with the town and its citizenry. Being able to establish a degree of good relations will be critical before pursuing avenues of inquiry.

* * *

"What can you tell us about Zebratown?" I asked SteelHooves, having to shout to make my voice heard over the distant roar of rushing water.

The Applejack Ranger's response was, "Look up."

I lifted my head, holding up a hoof to shield my eyes from the downpour. The drizzle of the last several hours had thickened, working towards another tempest.

Dark mountain cliffs rose sharply above us. As my gaze ascended, I saw Canterlot. The broken majesty of the castle and surrounding city jutted out of the mountainside almost directly above us. I had expected it to be shrouded in a haze of pink, but the rain painted the ornate ruins in the same palette of drab grays as the rest of Equestria. Multiple waterfalls, violently engorged by the rain, plunged down from above with the roar of a thousand manticores.

“Follow the largest of the waterfalls, and it will lead you to Zebratown,” SteelHooves informed us.

I watched the torrent plummeting downward parallel to the sheer cliffs until it met with a multi-arched structure (which reminded me oddly of the Fillydelphia roller coaster), washing over it with an unending, thunderous bellow. Although a few foothills still blocked our view of Zebratown itself, the village was very close now,

“What’s it like?” I asked.

The ghoul responded with a stereotypically laconic yet ominous, “Bad.”

“An’ here Ah expected him t’ say somethin’ even less helpful, like *‘wet’*.”

SteelHooves didn’t rise to the bait. “You have been told what happened to Canterlot,” he said. “When the first missiles were inbound, the Princesses joined together to raise an alicorn shield over the entire city. The shield was massive. It had to be. They weren’t just protecting the castle. There is an entire city up there you can’t easily see from below.”

I nodded. The royal castle was only the most visible landmark from below. Ministry Walk was in Canterlot, as was Princess Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns and who knew how much more. I could spot fragments of a winding road, switchbacks carved into the mountainside for chariots and carriages to make the ascent.

I was picturing it now: the Princesses’ potent shield being bombarded, awash with fire and shaken by explosions. I knew that alicorn shields hampered sound and vision, but still wondered what it must have been like for the ponies cringing inside.

“When the zebras’ megaspell went off, the shield filled with the Pink Cloud, so thick you could not even see the shadow of the castle inside it.”

In my mind’s eye, I now saw Canterlot replaced on the cliff side by a solid pink bubble, like a gargantuan bubblegum-flavored candy jawbreaker.

“Their shield continued to trap the Pink Cloud for hours while the Steel Rangers and others attempted to evacuate the towns in these foothills. Zebratown lies directly beneath Canterlot. It was hit the hardest when the shield went down.”

SteelHooves looked at me, “You may want to consider this a dry run for Canterlot itself.”

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Two:

My first attempts to befriend the residents of Zebratown were met with suspicion and guarded politeness, but no hostility. And, considering the state of things here, I regard that as a small triumph on my part.

Aside from differences in architecture, and of course the glaring striped-ness of the inhabitants, I could almost have believed I was in some extremely poor backwater pony town. Ponyville perhaps. Of the two things that stood out to me the most, the reluctant geniality of the population was something I could expect to find in almost any hub of civilization that has not yet ascended to the heights of society where the thinness and chill of the air requires an extra coat of snobbery.

The other matter was altogether more telling and more jarring, and that was how the war has left its hoofprint on Zebratown. Aside, that is, from the mere existence of this place. First, I found none of the patriotic posters or billboards that are beginning to dominate Canterlot. I hardly expected signs reminding the residents how much better and more virtuous they are than zebras, nor encouragements to join the war effort, but I was surprised not to find a single poster relating to any of the Ministries. In fact, the only hoofprint of the Ministries in all of Zebraville is the occasional patriotic song belted out by one of those new sprite-bots. There are a few of them bobbing around town. And just like the ponies of Canterlot, the zebras pay them little attention. Honestly, a song that inspires patriotism the first one hundred times you hear it will inevitably stop doing so within the first one thousand.

The other hoofprint is the presence of soldier ponies here. This, I am given to understand, is a very new development. Ever since the assassination attempt on Princess Celestia, the residents of Zebratown have been subject to harassment from ponies in nearby towns. Princess Luna has put Her hoof down, stationing some of Equestria's Finest in Zebratown for the residents' protection and safety.

* * *

The road to Canterlot had become a raging river. Calamity held me as we flew over the muddy waves, my horn glowing. Behind us, SteelHooves and Xenith rode an arched stone bridge which floated through the air behind us, surrounded by the glow of my magic. Centuries of these storms had torn the bridge from its original moorings and washed it into the valley where I had found it half-buried in mud. Pyrelight flew along beneath it, taking advantage of the stone canopy, her occasional breaths of fire reflected by the churning water below.

Seeing the river that the road had become, I again re-thought our decision to leave the *Sky Bandit* behind. The little bridge had become my compromise; it was large enough to carry the prisoners we intended to free as well. And if the streets of Zebratown were flooded, the stone bridge was less likely to float away while we busy rescuing than the passenger wagon.

Suddenly, my head began to pound. I felt a terrible tightness in my horn. Strange red tint flooded my vision. My magic wavered, threatening to implode. I tried to focus harder, but the throb in my head rose to a scream.

Pyrelight let out a screaming squawk.

I was barely able to hear SteelHooves shouting to Calamity, “Up! Get higher! Fast!” I felt the tug as Calamity grunted painfully, flapping his wings harder. I could hear Xenith let out an agonized moan.

Then, as quickly as the torment had come, it was gone. The screaming pain in my head was gone. My hearing cleared. I gasped, blinking away tears and the swimming redness. I wiped the tears from my eyes and then stared at my hoof, aghast at the smears of red quickly washing away in the rain. I had been bleeding from my eyes.

“W-what…?”

I felt Calamity relax, his flying shaky. Behind me, Xenith’s voice seemed to shudder, “By the ballsacks of a thousand star-devils, who dropped the moon on us?”

Okay, that swear was just disturbing. Although her description was as apt as any.

“Broadcaster,” SteelHooves said, his voice betraying no hints that he had suffered as we did. “There are probably several scattered about, washed out of Canterlot by the rain.”

I glanced behind us at the river we had passed over. The broadcaster was somewhere under the waves. We couldn’t have seen it; I couldn’t even hear the static over the roar of the waterfalls. There had been no warning until the effect began to kill us.

I turned my stare forward again as we crested the last hill. Zebratown sprawled out before us. The ruins had been left undamaged by the war only to be slowly battered down by the hoof of time and constant floods. Most of the zebra huts had collapsed, leaving not even skeletons. A small maze of crumbling shops and zebra insulae lined the merchant roads, and a few larger buildings formed grey masses shrouded behind sheets of falling water.

The largest waterfall from Canterlot, engorged by the storm, crashed into the widening mountain cliff less than a quarter-mile from the edge of Zebratown, its roar filling the air. The pounded aqueduct stood under the onslaught, delivering part of the waterfall’s payload directly into the town along an elevated canal. But the structure which had survived hundreds of years under the falls had collapsed at several points within town itself, the water now pouring into the streets instead of flowing out to the hills which had been the zebras’ cropland.

As we flew over the streets of Zebratown, I saw veins of pink swirling in the water. The rain proved a double-edged sword, washing the Pink Cloud out of the air. We could remain outside safely, but we dared not set hoof in the shallow lakes that had once been streets.

At least we would be able to keep our armor on. I needed my PipBuck to locate the zebras.

I looked up at the Canterlot Ruins above us, wondering what the rain was doing to the city above. Clearly, rains like this had happened many times before, and the Pink Cloud always returned. SteelHooves would have told us if it were otherwise. But would entering Canterlot during a storm make our mission safer or more dangerous?

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Three:

> *I spent another day in Zebratown, acquainting myself with the proprietors of several of the businesses where I may make later inquiries, as well as presenting myself to the zebra constabulary within the Zebratown Police Station. The local law was quick to inform me that Zebratown operates under the same laws as the rest of Equestria and that the zebras are more than capable and willing to police their own. They offered to show me their vault of confiscated items and*

contraband if I doubted their efforts.

Believing I had gotten off on the wrong hoof, I swiftly assured them that I was not here on any matter of the Ministries or military, and that I was just conducting personal research for a thesis. I received even more suspicious looks at that, as well as a rather rude inquiry as to whether I was researching "inherent zebra inferiority". As if anypony would want or need to do such a thing! No, I reassured them, confiding instead that I was doing a study on zebra astrology.

To my dismay, this produced an even worse reaction than the notion I was researching zebra inferiority, and it took all my not-inconsiderable charisma and social graces to assure them that my studies were benign. Still, I left the encounter feeling a little shaken and slightly alarmed at the task before me.

The thoughts I find most particularly disquieting are the images my mind conjures of the locals' reaction should they learn the truth behind my research.

* * *

"So where d'ya expect the zebras are bein' held?" Calamity said as we flew over a large open area dominated on one end by a fountain with a statue in the form of Princess Celestia. Water pressure from the raging aqueduct was causing the fountain to blast streams of water from Celestia's eyes, wingtips and horn like they were pressurized hoses.

I had my E.F.S. up, but the only lights on my compass were my friends and the occasional pulse of red. I could never get a fix on the enemy (or enemies) that my E.F.S. was picking up before they vanished again. It was making me nervous.

"There are not many structures left to hold them in," Xenith said, the sight of the ruined zebra town having no apparent effect on her.

"I don't believe the alicorns would choose one of the smaller shops as a base," SteelHooves noted. "It doesn't fit their sense of ego." That narrowed down the search areas considerably. "On the other hoof, they could be using the Zebratown sewers." And that just widened it a lot.

"Sewers?" I moaned.

"Tha' would explain why the town ain't even more flooded than this," Calamity appraised. "Ah'm guessing they built 'em t' handle spring floodin'."

"Amongst other things."

My compass flared red again as we swept over the broken rooftops of a row of zebra insulae and flew out over what had once been the Zebratown Amphitheatre (and was now a large inner-city lake). Crumbling walls of columns and archways ringed the old amphitheatre; each column that still remained intact was crowned with stone-carved masks of alien and most unwelcoming designs. I cringed at the thought of attending a performance with those wicked-looking faces staring down at me from every column of the theatre.

Standing in one rain-shadowed archway was the near-black form of an alicorn. She saw us almost at the same moment we spotted her. Then she vanished with a flash.

Fuck. It was one of the teleporting ones!

“Expect company,” SteelHooves warned.

* * *

We had to get out of the sky. We were too easy a target.

Calamity flew towards the largest intact structure, dropping me onto the cracked rooftop before setting down himself. Pyrelight darted out from under the stone bridge just before it slammed into the rooftop, spilling SteelHooves and Xenith. The Applejack’s Ranger landed in a graceless thud while the zebra somersaulted gymnastically, ending on all four hooves and turning to stare at the grumbling ghoul with a raised eyebrow and the slightest hint of a smirk.

“My fault!” I called out as SteelHooves pushed himself back up.

A loud groan rumbled through the roof underneath my hooves. I knew immediately that it was about to collapse. It had been on the verge of crumbling for decades, and our landing was the final insult.

Looking up at my companions, I whimpered, “I hate ceilings.” Ceilings, roofs, floors… anything that could tumble out from underneath me. In all the fucking wasteland, they were my greatest enemy. I started to focus, intent on levitating myself and my companions… and possibly laughing victoriously.

The roof caved in, sending plumes of pink gas upwards at us. My vision blurred, my head throbbed, my lungs fought for proper air. My spell imploded and I fell into the pink.

* * *

My body hit the floor in a chamber of thick pink gas. The Pink Cloud had seeped in through cracks in the ceiling and collected here. The medical assist spell in my PipBuck started flashing warnings across my E.F.S. as my internal organs began to suffer. My heart felt strained, my lungs struggled to take in enough air. I could feel something terribly unpleasant in my bowels.

There will be pockets where the Pink Cloud has settled and pooled, SteelHooves had warned us. *Avoid them if you can, dash through them with all haste if you cannot. While still only a fraction of the potency of the original Cloud, such pockets will kill you in seconds.*

I pulled up my PipBuck’s automap, checking my orientation towards the nearest door. “This way,” I tried to shout, my voice fighting for volume. “Follow me!” I charged for the door, praying that the room beyond was safe. If it was not, I would likely be dead before I could find another.

I hit the door, throwing it open. To my dismay, the hallway beyond was curtained with the same cloying pink. Half of the doors along the way were open, offering no salvation. The Pink Cloud would kill me before I reached the end of the hall.

Galloping to the first closed door, I screamed wretchedly as I found it locked. I was in no condition to pick a lock. I hurled myself at the next, my heart feeling like it was about to explode. My lungs were burning. My vision was getting dark.

The door opened. I tore into the next room, praising Celestia as the pink cleared, only to thud against a stone railing. My E.F.S. was still flashing warnings and the compass was all manner of red. I needed a health potion to reverse the damage the Pink Cloud had done, and fast before my organs started to fail.

With severe alarm, I realized that Velvet Remedy still had all our medical supplies.

My vision was dark but clearing. Calamity shot past me, hovering in the air just beyond the railing. As SteelHooves and Xenith galloped through the doorway behind me, I heard a crunching sound from beneath. Looking around, I realized we were on a semi-circular stone balcony overlooking a cavernous tiled room flooded in water. Much of the water was shallow enough to wade through, but there were sunken pockets where it was very deep. Streams of pink swam like ribbons all about the floor. The room below us had several small tiers, the steps between becoming waterfalls, and hosted many balconies and exits. A dozen zebras looked up at our appearance with hostile expressions and dead eyes.

"Lovely choice," Xenith intoned, sounding terribly weak. "If we wish to avoid the poisoned water, what better place than a bath house?"

The balcony shifted under our hooves. "Not again," I groaned, throwing my spell around myself and my companions as the tiled floor beneath us canted dangerously.

The semi-circle of stone tore from the wall, smashing down into the tiled floor below, shattering a hole in it. The four of us hovered over the bath house interior, surrounded by my magic.

"HA!" I yelled down at the ruins of the balcony, ignoring the odd looks I was getting from Calamity. "Ha, ha, ha!"

In response, a host of voices whinnied strangely from below. Several of the dead-looking zebras galloped towards the exits in room beneath us. Water had begun to gurgle down into the hole created by the fallen balcony.

The air filled with explosions as SteelHooves opened fire with his grenade machinegun, the grenades tearing the bodies of the zombie zebras apart. The room was filled with blasted water and flying chunks of tile and concrete.

At lease three of the "dead" zebras had made it to an exit, but most died in the onslaught. Xenith cried out as one of the escapees came charging up the pink hallway and leapt out the still-open door behind us, waves of pink mist curling out after it as it soared through the air and impacted with SteelHooves, knocking them both out of my levitation field. The zombie zebra and the ghoul plunged into one of the pools below with a splash.

"Well, he could use a bath," Xenith commented as we floated above the pool, watching the dark figures of the two hoof-fight under the water, neither of them able to drown.

"Y'all figure he needs any help?" Calamity asked. We both shook our heads.

"Where's Pyrelight?" I asked, suddenly realizing we were down a party member.

Calamity scowled, blushing a little. "Still flyin' 'round outside, Ah reckon. Bird's smart 'nuff not t' fall through a roof when she 'as wings." For Calamity's sake, I tried not to smirk.

The floor around the pools was slowly draining. Casting about, I spotted a row of yellow medical boxes. Salvation! …assuming there were any health potions to be found inside. Telekinetically pulling myself from the others, I flew up to the medical boxes. The first was unlocked, yet still full of medical supplies. Zebratown had not suffered the looting that had emptied nearly every unlocked box in the wasteland. If this is what Zebratown was like, how about Canterlot? I suddenly understood SteelHooves' concerns about distractions.

My head was still throbbing. My breathing was painful, fast and shallow. My gut twisting inside me as something seemed to shift, burning in my bowels. I didn't need the medical assist spell to know I was on the verge of something inside me failing. And I was the first out of the Cloud; my friends had to be worse. I floated the healing potions I found inside up to Calamity and Xenith, planning to use the first one I found in the next box myself. The next was locked.

My vision slowly darkened further as I focused on the lock. A new red light sprung up on my E.F.S. compass. Turning, I saw a zombie zebra push through a doorway, its seemingly lifeless eyes fixing on me, flaring with unholy light.

I whipped out my zebra rifle, sending three bullets straight into its head. *Pfft. Pfft. Pfft.* I could see the flare of orange flame as the corpse's brain burned. The zebra thing stumbled and went down like a sack of flour.

Turning back to the medical box, I finally got it open. Celestia lick me like she loves me! There was a super restoration potion inside! I downed it quickly before my vision could fade entirely and I lost the ability to focus anymore.

At once, my vision started to clear, my breathing became easier, my heart started to beat more strongly in my breast. My ears filled with an unnatural, grating sound. I turned as the dead zebra was lifted back to its hooves in a swirl of unholy energy.

But… but I shot it in the head. With *fire!*

The "Canterlot" zebra proved just how much it didn't care as it struck out at me with a hoof. The impact bruised through my armor, sending my weightless body flying backwards. My head struck one of the medical boxes, exploding in pain and stars as I collapsed into the water. I could hear Xenith splash down as my magic imploded. I felt a sticky warmth in my mane; the medical assist flashed warnings of head trauma.

Between my previous concussion and the weakening from the Cloud, I feared I my have suffered permanent damage. The fear washed away as I passed out.

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Four:

Bearing in mind the extreme security on this terminal and the sensitive nature of the charts and documents already stored within, I have decided that it should be safe to record the particulars of my assignment and the discussion which led to my being thrust into the cultural wasteland. (And by that, of course, I mean anyplace that is not Canterlot.) I wish to do so now, while the words of the Princess are still fresh in my head, before time and events further mar the memory. I suppose I could have a memory orb treatment, but such objects are terrifyingly lacking in proper security. Any unicorn could get into them.

I should first note that I took this assignment willingly, even eagerly. There are some things that are simply more important to a pony than proper surroundings, proper meals and proper company. And for every pony, the foremost of those things is their special talent, as magically emblazoned on their flank by their cutie mark. Sadly, there are ponies whose only talent in life is to be a stuck-up bore, or a rock farmer, or something equally as awful. But I had the unique misfortune of having the cutie mark of an event that would never occur within my lifetime.

The last centennial meteor shower occurred over Ponyville ten years before I was even born, and the next is not scheduled to occur until decades after I am likely to have passed away. So the ability to not only see but actually touch that very thing my cutie mark represents, to hold it in my hooves, was too overwhelming a gift to possibly turn away.

Being the Royal Astronomer comes with many benefits, not the least of which is being within the same orbit as the Princesses. I have been in the position to observe Them in less than entirely formal company, and had even had occasion to speak to Princess Luna or Princess Celestia in years prior at Their beckoning. As such, I believe I have constructed a better assessment of the character of each of the Princesses than most anypony other than perhaps Their Royal Guard, each other and some of the castle staff.

For example, Princess Luna is the younger sister. She is also the smaller and the cuter sister. As a result of these traits, I have seen many ponies fall prey to the notion that She must also be the weaker and the more innocent of the two. It is a misconception I have seen the Princess Herself play to on more than one occasion, usually with devastating precision. If anything can be said of the Night Princess, it is that She is the darker of the two.

In my personal estimation, ponies are often inclined to suspect Princess Celestia is capable of acts that our benevolent Princess could never commit, and equally inclined to underestimate what Princess Luna is capable of.

It was with these things in mind that many within the castle were fearful of what was to come after the zebras attempted to assassinate Princess Celestia. For days, Princess Luna locked Herself away in Her chambers, refusing meetings with every pony save Her Sister. On the fourth day, She called Her cabinet to Her and the Six Mares met with the Princesses for most of that day and the fifth. After they left, I was summoned.

To my surprise, Princess Luna was neither wrathful nor cold nor overcome with remorse. She was, if I had to put a word to it, contemplative. She invited me in, offered refreshment, and made sure I was comfortable. (Which I was, aside from being dreadfully nervous.) And then She opened up to me, telling me things I do not believe She has likely shared with any other pony outside of Her inner circle, if only because it is a subject matter She chooses not to discuss.

I shall endeavor to transcribe the words of Her Majesty, Princess Luna, as best I can recall.

"If you were to listen to the old pony tales, they would have you believe that the conflict between Celestia and Myself happened over the course of an evening… which, after a fashion, I suppose it did. But it was not a typical evening. The way it is told, one would think I threw a tantrum. Or that My Sister hurled me to a lunar prison at the climax of a breakfast squabble. Celestia did not choose to harness the most powerful magical energies in all of Equestria and turn them against Me either lightly or swiftly. In my insanity, I gave Her no other choice, and She still tried every avenue to reason with Me. Nor was the attack unexpected and unprepared for.

"What the history books gloss over and the myths leave out entirely is that the morning I rebelled lasted longer than what would normally be considered a week. There are also those who mistakenly believe that because Celestia raised and lowered My moon for a thousand years that She is more powerful and that Her banishment of Me was petty and unnecessary as She could have just taken control and lowered My moon Herself. That is not the case. She could only raise My moon all those centuries because I was not there, as I would be able to raise Her sun in Her absence. When it comes to the night, to use an ancient term, My power trumps Hers. I held my moon high and forced Her sun to stay down for over a week's time, and She could do nothing about it."

I cannot properly convey the sense of sorrow, bitterness and remorse that hid behind Princess Luna's voice. Yet regardless of how much private pain this revisiting inflicted, the Night Princess persevered.

"By the end of it, Equestria had entered a deep winter, the freezing cold was killing plants and wildlife alike, and ponies everywhere were suffering and facing death from cold or starvation. I did not care. I was in a great rage, and I wanted to punish.

"My wrath did not just spill out onto our lands. Before the end, both the griffins and the zebras had sent agents to assassinate me. But between my power and the protection of my armor, they stood no chance and I laid them low.

"Celestia did what She had to do. And even She could not break Me of My madness. Even My Sister was not powerful enough or pure enough of heart to save Me. It took others to do that. There is a… spark that is required to power the Elements of Harmony to their fullest, and it is hard to generate that spark if One is acting alone."

Words cannot express the depth of emotion I felt at these revelations. The wonder and the horror of them was beyond expression. Princess Luna gave me time to digest these things and finally to dare ask why She had chosen to confide them in such a lowly pony as myself. To be honest, there was a part of me that feared for my life. Such secrets were not for the likes of mere astronomers, royal or otherwise.

"I wish you to understand the context that I suspect surrounds the task I must ask you to undertake," She told me.

"You must understand two things. First, that the conflict between Celestia and Myself did not happen, dare I say it, 'overnight'. I had planned. Made preparations. I had anticipated that Celestia would use the Elements against Me eventually, and that others would try to stop me even sooner. So I had mystical armor fashioned for myself out of the rarest and most magically stalwart of all metals. What I did not foresee is that My Sister would banish Me. I had expected Her to attempt to strike Me down, and my defenses were designed around such an assumption. I had expected My Sister to be as cruel as I had become, and thus I lost."

With that she produced a small, plain lockbox. She used Her levitation, floating the box at a distance as if loathe to touch it. Setting the lockbox before me, She opened it with yet another spell, revealing a charred and twisted scrap of metal.

"This is a piece of Nightmare Moon's armor." She bade me to take it, examine it. The metal was light and cool to the touch, pale blue with an extraordinary sheen that put silver to shame. I asked Her where in Equestria had She found such metal.

"The metal is not native to Equestria. In fact, it is not native to this world at all. Every one hundred years, the skies of our world are graced with a meteor shower. There was one in the year Nightmare Moon was set free and I was saved… on the longest day of the one thousandth anniversary of my incarceration.

"I can see you have done the math. It is worth noting that on rare occasions, perhaps once every dozen showers, not all of the meteors burn up in the sky. There have been impacts. During the meteor shower which occurred in the year I was banished, there was one such impact in the Everfree Forest, not far from… the old castle.

"I believe the zebras' name for this is starmetal, and they have considerably more myths about it than we do. I want you to go to Zebratown… you may take this with you… and learn all you can of those myths.

"The zebras' reaction to My position has been more extreme than We had anticipated. For the sake of all of Equestria, I need to understand why."

* * *

Reading that passage while I recovered may have been a mistake. I had never envisioned what Nightmare Moon had done before. Never ever tried. Now that I did, the vision shook my soul with horror.

I was in a great rage, and I wanted to punish. I felt myself grow pale.

I thought of myself tearing through one of the shops in Arbu, telekinetically throwing the ponies inside up against the ceiling so I could see their Arbu marks. Then opening fire with the zebra rifle and releasing their burning, flailing bodies to fall to the floor.

There it was. I was Nightmare Moon in miniature.

But, if Nightmare Moon could become Princess Luna again, if She could lift herself from such abysmal depths of monstrosity to become the loving and love-worthy Goddess of our worship, then there really was hope for me. The words in the journal gave me the confidence that my hopes were more than just wishful thinking.

At the same time, they were a reminder that the stain of my fury-driven murders would never fade away. SteelHooves was right. Like Princess Luna, I would forever remember what I had done. And like the zebras remembered the actions of Nightmare Moon, there would be those to whom I could never be anything but that monster.

Xenith gave me the last of the healing potions. The third medical box had been locked as well, but it turns out lockpicking isn't required when one of your friends has a hellhound horn capable of slashing through metal with the ease of slicing an apple. I drank it, watching the medical assist warnings on my E.F.S. slowly die away.

"Next zombie zebra gets a missile up its kisser," SteelHooves grumbled. I had gleaned that the battle in the pool had been frustrating, his armor refusing to allow him to fire his weapons underwater. The mental picture of two creatures who could not die from anything less than massive bodily harm being reduced to throwing hooves at each other underwater struck me as darkly amusing. I didn't think SteelHooves would appreciate it if I snickered.

Soon, we were moving again. The bath house was not the prison we were looking for. The plethora of "Canterlot" zebras and the absence of alicorns told me that. But the basement of the bath house gave us an entrance into the sewers; and as much as I hated the idea of exposing ourselves to the water here, we couldn't ignore one of the most likely places for the alicorns to be holding their captives. Fortunately, since both Xenith and I had both landed in the bath house water with no discernible ill effect, I suspected the concentration of pink in the rainwater was low enough to be reasonably safe. Or, at least, that is what I kept telling myself, as soon we were almost belly-deep in flowing rainwater, pushing our way through the huge, dark tunnels beneath Zebratown.

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Seven:

Today, I availed myself of one of the more unique buildings in Zebratown. The zebras have made an interesting effort to blend their cultural heritage with a more proper Equestrian aesthetic. One of the results is the (in)famous bath houses of Zebratown. Water is piped in from the aqueduct, and several of the pools are boiler-heated. Patrons move between hot baths and cool as they mingle and discuss the matters of the day, or enjoy a poolside brunch at the provided tables. As utterly uncouth as bathing publicly is, I must admit that the experience provided by these bath houses is luxurious, both physically and socially.

> *I was astonished to discover there were ponies living in Zebratown. Only a hoof-full, I am told, but there are ponies who have chosen to live their lives in this place. On purpose. I had the opportunity to converse with one such pony at the bath house, a delightful peasant mare named Daisy. It is Daisy's assertion that she chose to live here because the zebras need to be reminded that not all ponies are, in her words, "xenophobic bigots."*
>
> *And on the matter of irrational fears, I found myself the subject of just such sentiments when a zebra mother screamed and pulled her foal from the bath (and soon the bath house entirely) upon the mere sight of me. When I endeavored to determine what I had done to provoke this rather extreme response, most of the zebras would not meet my eyes out of embarrassment. One finally explained, her face reddened with shame, that the mark of the three streaking meteors on my flank was the source of the zebra's terror. It would appear that the myths of the zebras have such a hold on the psyche of some that my cutie mark alone is cause for such reaction.*
>
> *Upon leaving the bath house, I noticed several zebra colts quickly attempting to hide an inhaler, looking for all the land like they had been caught by their parents reading an issue of Wingboner Magazine. I am hardly a pony to know about such things, but I suspect they were using illegal zebra-imported pharmaceuticals. Perhaps the constables need to be keeping a better watch.*

* * *

Whoooooooosh!

Twin missiles shot out from SteelHooves' armor-integrated battle saddle and barrelled down the sewer tunnel. More than enough firepower to kill even a Canterlot zombie-zebra.

The rockets exploded against the alicorn's shield with almost no effect.

Ahead of us, the cave-like tunnel continued beyond a gridwork of heavy iron bars which blocked our way. SteelHooves and Calamity tried to occupy the purple-coated alicorn as I hacked a wall-mounted terminal that controlled access to a heavy metal door inset in the side of the sewer tunnel. I worked as quickly as I could, hacking through the system, scanning strings of data for possible passwords.

The door clanged and slid open as I found and entered the correct passphrase: not_a_rainbow.

We charged blindly inside, SteelHooves hiding a proximity mine on the backside of the terminal before closing the door behind us and plunging us into darkness.

Several pairs of glowing white lights flickered in the darkness. My E.F.S. compass was showing four red lights. I slipped into S.A.T.S. and locked onto the first zombie zebra, aiming Little Macintosh right for the deadlights of its eyes.

BLAM!! BLAM!!

The powerful little revolver echoed in the metal chamber. SteelHooves' helmet spotlight burst to life, revealing a long, amateur laboratory filled with tables of ancient chemistry sets. The zombie zebra I had shot lay dead, most of its head removed. I really hoped it couldn't get back up from that. Three more stood about the lab, one of them holding a spear in its mouth.

SteelHooves opened fire, turning one corner of the lab into a blast zone, filling the room with smoke, heat and shattered glass. I quickly averted my eyes and bucked over a table, crouching behind from the backblast of SteelHooves' attack. Calamity and Xenith joined me.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Calamity yelled out, covering his hat with his forelegs.

SteelHooves, thank the Goddesses, stopped firing explosives. A second later, the spear struck into the table, the metal blade gleaming green as it pierced through the table, slashing my shoulder. I cried out, pressing a hoof to stop the bleeding. Calamity flew up, firing his novasurge rifles while Xenith pulled out healing bandages and treated my wound.

I heard another explosion, but this was from outside the door. The alicorn had tried to use the terminal and set off the mine. She wouldn't be getting in.

I felt a wave of dizziness. My fear of permanent damage to my head resurfaced. But then the dizziness was joined by a gut-wrenching feeling and I doubled over.

"Poison," Xenith said simply. "Fear not. I know this brew. You will suffer, but only a little. Then you will be as good as new."

As I doubled over in agonizing cramps, I found myself strongly disagreeing with Xenith's definition of a little.

I heard the horrible, necromantic sound of the zombie zebra I had shot getting back up. Calamity fired again and I heard it liquefy.

The last zombie zebra leapt over the table, turning to face Xenith and me. I tried to focus, aiming Little Macintosh, but a tearing, twisting pain in my abdomen obliterated my concentration, leaving me gasping for air and praying for unconsciousness.

Xenith moved swiftly, striking at the zombie zebra with a hoof. I saw her eyes widen in fear as the monster failed to be paralyzed, taking advantage of her attack and sinking its teeth into her back just beneath one of her shoulderblades.

"Don't touch me!" Xenith screamed, twisting away, her coat and flesh tearing bloodily as she pulled herself from the teeth of the monster. She whipped her head about, the hellhound horn slicing at the zombie zebra. Her attacker's head tumbled from its body and rolled, stopping in front of my face, the deadlights in its eyes fading out as it stared lifelessly at me.

Xenith screamed again, pounding her hooves against the corpse. A moment later, she speared the dead zombie's head with her hellhound horn and flung it across the room. It hit a box full of inhalers, knocking it over and spilling them across the floor.

Xenith collapsed next to me, trembling and breathing hard, blood flowing down her back.

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirteen:

Inquiries are proceeding at an abysmal pace. Very few zebras seem to know much of their homeland's folklore. (And I have received more than one admonishment for using that phraseology, the zebras insisting that Equestria is their homeland.) It would seem that a large portion of the town's population are either unschooled in their heritage or have chosen to abandon anything that would tie them to the zebras we are fighting, including an adamantly feigned ignorance about any aspects of their homeland's culture and religion.

I cannot blame them. There have been a number of small incidents since I have arrived. These have mostly been spray-painting, broken flower pots, trampled gardens and other minor harassments. But I do understand that a constant air of intolerance, perpetrated by an insignificant few, can have an impact on the general psyche.

The soldiers who are charged with protecting the residents from such incursions are more worrisome than the hooligans themselves. I have come to learn that a few of the newly assigned mares and bucks served at Shattered Hoof Ridge. I will be writing a correspondence before the week is out, suggesting that perhaps it would be better to rotate out any member of our military recently involved in battle with the striped.

* * *

"Remember this place, little one," Xenith said softly as Calamity inexpertly applied Xenith's blood-stopping goop and the last of our bandages. "I will want to return here."

I nodded as I opened the laboratory's wall safe. I had hoped for more medicine, but instead found a revolver, ammo, a few decaying books and a recipe for making Dash. I gave the last to Xenith, taking the ammo for myself.

I took a moment to mark the lab on my PipBuck's automap before trotting up to the wall terminal that operated the door on the opposite side of the labs. This one was a lot easier to hack. The door slid open.

Xenith moved slowly, letting the bandages mend her wound as best it could. The zombie zebra had gotten more flesh than meat; but she still needed a healing potion, and we had used all we had scavenged burning off the effects of the Pink Cloud. She edged up to an intact chemistry set and opened her satchel, pulling out jars of ingredients and strips of bloodwing leather.

Seeing that Xenith was preparing to brew, I turned to Calamity, "SteelHooves and I will scout ahead. You stay with here with Xenith." The pegasus' Enclave weapons had proven the best we had against zombie zebras in an enclosed space. There were two puddles of glowing goop on the floor that would never get up again.

I closed the door to the laboratory behind us. Now that I knew the passwords, access would be easy, and I didn't want to give our enemies easy access. We moved forward. Water spilled into the tunnel through countless pipes and gutter holes. Thunder echoed through the sewers for long seconds after each crack from the sky outside. With all the noise, even SteelHooves was almost able to be stealthy.

We turned a corner and stopped, seeing the glittering wall of an alicorn shield covering the passage ahead. On the other side of the shield, the water level had built up until it filled the entire passage. Two dark green alicorns sat motionlessly in front of the shield, flanking the tunnel like guardian statuettes.

"What in the…?"

With a burst of light, the dark purple teleporter appeared between her two green sisters. She was bleeding from wounds caused by the terminal explosion. SteelHooves dropped into a battle stance. I pulled out my sniper rifle, kicking on my targeting spell, hoping I could get a shot off before she put up her shield.

"Gotcha!" she grinned wickedly, her horn flaring as she vanished in a flash, taking the two other alicorns with her. The shield spell disappeared and the wall of water came rushing at us.

* * *

I kicked, fighting to break the surface of the rushing river as it washed me violently through the Zebratown sewers. My head pushed above water, and I gasped for air in the moment before I was pulled under again, my body twisting about in the swift, churning water, my sense of direction torn away.

I felt my body slam into a set of iron bars. My head began to throb, a terrible pressure building in my horn, agony filling my ears. I tried to use the bars as a guide and push myself to the surface, lungs burning, desperate for air. Instead my horn hit the floor of the sewer, sending a spasming pain through my head. I gasped, drinking water into my lungs, beginning to drown.

In a panic, I reversed my direction and pushed myself up as hard as I could. My head burst through the water, the rushing underground river pressing me hard against the grating. I coughed up water, my head splitting in pain, my horn feeling like it was about to explode. My eyes were red with bloody tears.

Oh Goddesses! A broadcaster!

I was pinned. I couldn't swim away. Gasping, my mind crying in the most exquisite pain, I forced myself to dive back down. I opened my eyes, looking around in the murky, fast-moving water, and quickly spotted the skeletons of several ponies (or possibly zebras) who had washed up against the iron bars. One of them had a PipBuck on its foreleg. As swiftly as I could, my vision doubling as the pony in my head screamed, I tore the skeletal foreleg away, PipBuck and all, and twisted it, pushing it between the bars. The torrent washed the PipBuck and its corrupted broadcaster away.

I lurched back above the waves, coughing heavily, the pain in my head instantly gone save for a lingering headache. Through the iron bars, I could see the cold grey light of the stormy day, the water spilling out the end of the drainage tunnel I was trapped in. I panted harshly, letting the water pin me against the bars until the deluge lessened into a breast-high stream.

Something hard and metal dug into my rump. I moved and then felt in the water with my hooves. My sniper rifle.

A few minutes later, a single white light cut through the darkness of the tunnel behind me. At first, I thought it was a one-eyed zombie zebra. But then I recognized

SteelHooves' helmet spotlight. My friend trotted towards me, splashing in the sewer river.

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Three:

My research is beginning to bear fruit. Apparently, the most knowledgeable zebra in town regarding the old tales is currently being held prisoner in the Zebratown Police Station, although the shopkeeper I spoke to was either unable or unwilling to comment on the crimes for which he is being held. I will be attempting to gain an audience with the prisoner tomorrow.

Nearly a month into my exile and as much as I miss the castle, there is something about this strange, dirty little peasant town that is growing on me, albeit not in an altogether pleasant way. The shopkeepers no longer look at me with suspicion, and I enjoyed a crisp hay lunch with Daisy this afternoon.

However, it is becoming increasingly clear that, despite the constables' insistence to the contrary, this town has a deeply embedded contraband problem. There have been three deaths in the outlying farmlands within the last three weeks that can be connected to a newly-banned drug called Dash. The deaths involve one overdose and two shootings, the latter both by the same individual who was high on the drug at the time she committed the murders. Combine this with a few of my own observations within the town, and I am becoming confident that Zebratown has its hooves deep in either the distribution or possibly even manufacturing of this dangerous substance.

On the way home, I noticed a couple ponies trying to sneak into town carrying what looked like bottles of liquor. Their behavior was suspicious enough that I stopped them and began asking their business in town loudly enough that one of the nearby soldiers couldn't help but take note. Unsurprisingly, the ponies quickly remembered an appointment elsewhere.

* * *

No more exploring the sewers. At least, not until every other possibility had been exhausted. The alicorns had shown just how easily they could turn it into a deathtrap.

"Since when do alicorns say 'gotcha'?" I asked, standing shakily on the cobblestone street of Zebratown in a few inches of water. After what I had been through, I wasn't so concerned about getting wet anymore, no matter how many ribbons of pink I could see in the water.

Pyrelight circled overhead, seeming happy to see us again. We had managed to get separated from Xenith and Calamity, and I was dreading having to go back down to find them. No, better that I send SteelHooves to fetch them. He, at least, couldn't drown.

I looked around, realizing I had lost track of my metal-clad companion. The Applejack's Ranger had been standing right next to me a moment ago…

Turning, I spotted him standing at the edge of a side road, staring at his hooves silently. I trotted up, asking if he was all right.

"I died here," he said before falling into a long, strange silence.

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Four:

I was on my way to meet with the local constabulary when I was forced to alter my normal approach due to several large, pony-drawn wagons blocking the street. Not being in a rush, I decided to take the scenic way around, taking the opportunity to locate and browse a store I had heard of, nestled in a back corner of Zebratown, which reputedly sells replica ceremonial zebra masks. I believe the proprietor of such a store would naturally possess a wealth of knowledge about zebra customs and, by extension, beliefs.

My plans for the afternoon were disrupted by a quickly muffled call for help. Apparently, a few of "Equestria's Finest" decided to have their way with a rather comely zebra mare. By the time I arrived on the scene, the bucks were on the ground, sprawling before their very angry commanding officer – a sergeant by the name of Applesnack whom I later learned was one of the soldiers transferred here after Shattered Hoof Ridge.

From the way one of the soldier bucks held his ribs as he limped away, it was clear the sergeant had chosen a non-vocal means of intervening in the would-be assault, although he certainly had some choice words for them after he had bucked them flat.

What had the greatest impact on me, however, was what happened after. I was taking note of the sergeant's name with intention of recommending some manner of commendation when the zebra mare, shaken and sobbing, reached out a hoof to thank him. Sergeant Applesnack rounded, pushing her away and informing her that he stopped those bastards because they were a disgrace to Equestria and most emphatically not for the likes of her.

I feel another letter is in order, this time addressed directly to the Princess Herself.

* * *

SteelHooves' gaze was fixed on the stones of the road before him. In the cobblestones I saw four hoofprints. They looked like they had melted into the stones themselves. Slowly, SteelHooves stepped forward, placing a hoof into each of the indentations. I felt an odd shudder as I saw they matched him perfectly.

He looked upwards towards the spectre of Canterlot directly above us.

"I was here the day Equestria died," he said slowly. I stood still, listening.

"We knew the end was coming. Applejack and I were here evacuating every pony and zebra we could. Stable Three was locked behind the Princesses' shield, but there were others nearby." He turned to me, "You cannot imagine what it was like to look up and see the missiles slamming into the shield around Canterlot, trying to break their way in and kill everypony inside."

He looked away. "Then we got word that the zebras had wiped Cloudsdayle out of the sky. Applejack excused herself and raced to Ponyville. I…" He gave a shuddering sigh. "I *never* blamed her for leaving. Or for ordering me to stay. There was no pony to blame but myself."

From the timber in the stoic ghoul's voice, I could tell my friend was actually crying. My heart went out to him, unable to bear hearing my stalwart Applejack's Ranger finally unable to hide his hurt.

"We had been trying to repair our relationship ever since the night she had seen the darkness in me. I wanted to save us, but the damage was too deep. She could hardly look at me anymore. I didn't understand *why* she was fighting to keep us together when I didn't deserve her. …But then, I didn't know she was pregnant either."

I wanted to hold him. To comfort him somehow. But I knew he wouldn't be able to feel it. That armor of his separated him from the rest of us. All I could do was be somepony who was here and who would listen.

SteelHooves tried to shake off his sorrow. "I remained here. She left me in charge of the evacuation in her absence. I had been in Zebratown before; I knew the place. None of the other troops had that familiarity with Zebratown. I was the logical choice."

He looked up, remembering as he spoke. My mind's eye insisted on painting a picture from his words.

"The Princesses' shield was huge," he reminded me. "Several hundred yards above the city, the shield bisected the waterfalls that pour down into Canterlot. All that water came down and had no place to go. It pooled in the bottom of the shield as the missiles began impacting from above.

"Water absorbs the Pink Cloud all too readily. When the shield collapsed, that water fell down on Zebratown like a tidal wave from the sky. Except the water was saturated pink. That wave washed over the town and everypony… everyone left inside it."

He looked down again, stepping back from the indentations in the cobblestones, his voice carrying a pained nostalgia that told me just how much he didn't like being in this place. "I was standing right there."

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Seven:

My correspondence to Princess Luna continue to go unanswered.

I took the starmetal into one of the town's jewelers for their appraisal, only to find myself kicked out of her shop and told never to return. This, from the same mare who swore not six days again that she neither knew nor cared a thing about the old zebra tales.

I was just leaving when a chariot raced by, drawn by a very familiar-looking pony as two others hurled burning bottles and shouted anti-zebra epitaphs too foul to sully myself repeating. One of the bottles crashed through the window of the jewelry shop, setting it ablaze. Doing what any good pony would have done, I tried to gallop to the shopkeeper's aid, but she fought me off, tossing a silver tea set at me before fleeing out a back entrance.

I suffered smoke inhalation and some minor burns, but nothing serious. The shopkeeper likewise was relatively unharmed. Not all were so lucky. A small zebra filly was caught in one of the fires and remains in the hospital, badly burned. The hospital here is poorly equipped and sparsely staffed, but they are doing what they can with healing poultices from zebra recipes you likely won't find in the books of the Athenaeums of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.

The zebra filly shares the hospital with one of her attackers. Two of the ponies are being held in the Zebratown Police Station until a transfer wagon arrives. Again we have Sergeant SteelHooves to thank; the sergeant responded to the attack by drawing his sidearm and shooting the mare pulling the chariot in the leg.

I must take a moment to praise Zebratown's firefighting force who had the flames under control before the fires could spread to nearby buildings.

I spent most of the evening with the local constabulary, repeating endlessly my account of events. I attempted to use the opportunity to learn more about the zebra prisoner they have sealed in isolation, my efforts at gaining an actual audience having come to naught. This evening, one of the zebra constables deigned to inform me that the prisoner was charged with smuggling contraband into Equestria as well as another charge that I believe can best be translated as "heresy."

When I questioned whether the contraband was related to the increasing number of Dash-related incidents, the constable abruptly denied any connection between Zebratown and the local drug problem, proclaiming the influx of Dash was almost certainly coming from someone associated with the nearby veterinary pharmaceuticals company.

Instead, the constable insisted that the contraband, in this case, amounted to a book. When I asked if I might see the book in question, stating that it might shed some light on my research, the zebra informed me that he would be more than happy to oblige me were it not for the unfortunate fact that the Ministry of Image confiscated the book, removing it from their contraband vault a scant few days before.

* * *

Heresy. I had a very dark suspicion of what that meant. And what book had been taken from the zebras' contraband vault. We were headed into the Canterlot Ruins to get that Book, that very *black* Book, from Rarity's secret safe at the behest of the Trixie-Goddess. I did not know what my plans were from that point, but I had made it very clear to myself that getting The Black Book to Maripony was crucial.

Calamity and Xenith had rejoined us, and now we were crouched in the ruins of a nameless shop, staring across the cobblestone plaza at the Zebratown Police Station. Thanks to the journal of Midnight Shower, I had gotten the idea that this was the best place to look for the alicorns and their prisoners.

I heard a soft *ding* behind me as Calamity raided the store's bits register. I didn't even bother shaking my head.

I pulled out my binoculars, looking the Zebratown Police Station over. The aqueduct ran right behind the station, and part of it had collapsed, taking about a fourth of the building with it. The remains of the Zebratown Police Station stood in two separate sections connected only by the basement. I spotted an alicorn on the roof of the larger section. This was the place.

I looked at the front door and realized immediately that we would need another point of access. Not because of guards or a lock, but because the metal of the double-doors had warped, fusing into each other. I suspected that the collapsing aqueduct had poured a heavy amount of Pink Water into the police building, causing all manner of mischief.

"Which section do you believe they are holding my daughter in?"

"Oh, that's easy," Calamity answered for me. "Whichever section we don't try first."

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Eight:

My efforts to find the little shop that sells zebra ceremonial masks have again been thwarted by a combination of obscure local and conflicting directions. To an extent, I can understand and forgive the zebras for the aggravation. Any business steeped in the heritage of their native land would increase the negative perception of Equestrian zebras and likely become a magnet for attacks like the one yesterday.

I was able to encourage a young buck to speak with me in return for my discretion regarding a transaction between himself and several foals wherein inhalers where exchanged for bits. Not only do I have a possibly more accurate description of the store's locale, but the buck divulged a few slippery tenets of the striped's mindset regarding Princess Luna. For example, according to zebra folklore, the Princess Luna's madness and "depths of evil" could only be explained by (and he said this in a derisive tone, clearly scoffing at such superstitions) "external forces".

When I queried him further, asking what he meant by "external forces", *he laughed and responded, "The stars, you silly pony. The stars!"*

In an attempt to engender camaraderie, I suggested that if he really wished to rebel against the foolishness of his elders, he could always get a star-shaped tattoo. To my surprise, he grew upset. His words, minus the unnecessary and rather crude epitets, amounted to "I mock their old religion because I am smarter than they are, not because I am stupid."

After that, I could get nothing further from him.

This brings to mind a tangentially related bit of local gossip. The mare who took a bullet to the leg died last night. The official statement claimed ill-defined "complications." If the rumor is true, she went into Dash withdrawal during surgery. In a small way, the attack was the zebras' own fault.

And on that topic, I passed Sergeant SteelHooves on my way to the markets. The stallion was busily scrubbing down his combat armor. Some pony had vandalized it most egregiously by painting stripes on the protective plates and scrawling "Zebra Lover" on one of the boots.

I offered my commiseration. It was completely unfair that he should be suffering ridicule for the stalwart performance of his duties, something I feel the majority of the soldiers here neglect more often than not.

Tossing the scrub brush, he spat and told me, "I hate this town and I'll be happy to leave it. Place like this makes it hard to simply hate zebras and love ponies." We conversed a short while, and during the course of the discussion, I found myself proclaiming the belief that these zebras were Equestrian citizens like any pony and deserved no less love and friendship. After all, it is not their fault that they were born with stripes. They had no choice in the matter. (If they did, I am sure they would have chosen to be ponies; it is not as if they are making a fashion statement.)

I have always been a very open-minded and egalitarian pony, after all.

He replied, "True. But I'm a soldier." He spoke as if it behooves a soldier to only think of zebras as the enemy and nothing more. Perhaps there is wisdom in that, but if so, it makes me thankful that I am not a military pony.

"This is the last you'll see of me. I've volunteered for a special assignment with the Ministry of Wartime Technology. My wagon pulls out this weekend, and I will never set hoof in this wretched town again. Equestria willing, I'll never have to play pleasant with a zebra again either."

Zebratown, I suspect, will be worse off for his absence.

* * *

I stopped reading, my ears perking at the sound of exploding missiles at least two blocks away. I whispered a quick prayer for SteelHooves. Surely, the Mighty Alicorn Hunter wouldn't have difficulty taking down one alicorn… I hoped. I quickly chided myself for worrying. SteelHooves was the most resilient ghoul-pony-creature-thing in the entire damned Equestrian Wasteland. I should have more faith in my friends. But… still, I worried for their safety any time a plan called for anyone other than me to be the one taking risks alone.

Calamity would probably clop me upside the head if he knew what I was thinking. Hell, Homage would… well, actually, Homage would probably clop me someplace else and make me like it, and I really shouldn't be thinking about things like that at a time like this. Focus, Littlepip. Focus!

Calamity, Xenith and I pushed through what had once been an interior door in an upper floor of the Zebratown Police Station. The collapse had left the door exposed to the outside, giving us our point of ingress. Pyrelight flew in behind us silently. At this point, our efforts relied on stealth, so SteelHooves had volunteered to draw away the rooftop alicorn as we snuck inside.

I found myself struggling to both like and dislike Midnight Shower. I suppose it didn't matter either way. The pony was long dead. Maybe I cared because the royal astronomer had been given the amazing gift of enjoying the presence of Celestia and Luna personally. Or maybe it was because this was somepony who had known SteelHooves at a rather difficult and important time of his life, and had made the effort to be at least cordial. However, the pony's civil bigotry continuously jarred me. And to think this was a member of the royal castle.

Before leaving him behind, I had asked SteelHooves about his first time in Zebratown, letting him know that the journals from the ravaged hut had mentioned his name.

"The attempted assassination of Princess Celestia and the heroic death of Big Macintosh struck deeply at everypony. Amongst those affected the worst were those of us in Big Macintosh's company. After the Battle of Shattered Hoof Ridge," SteelHooves had told me, "Princess Luna ordered all the soldiers involved to be stationed closer to the heart of Equestria and away from the front lines for at least half a year. A reprieve from the war, combined with the offer of counseling." His assignment had been in Zebratown, keeping the peace.

There were faint hints of pink in the room beyond. The effects were minimal, making me feel vaguely sick rather than the swift and cloying death that the concentrated pink we had experienced in the bath house. Still, we had to move swiftly. I prayed the alicorns weren't keeping the prisoners in a contaminated section. If so, the zebras we were here to rescue were probably already dead.

The first room opened into a narrow hallway. Calamity spread his wings only to have them hit the walls on either side. "Well, now that just ain't fair!" he grumped. "Stupid zebra architecture." He looked at Xenith apologetically. "No offense."

"None taken."

We crept forward, moving from one room to the next. Pyrelight and I took the lead, my self-levitation allowing me to clear away tripwires and disarm pressure plates that the alicorns had set up all over the upper floor. Again, the alicorns' tactics struck me as unusual.

I heard voices up ahead, the strangely majestic voices of the pseudo-goddesses. Only this time, the voices were strangely different. I couldn't put my hoof on exactly why. I waved a hoof at those behind me, motioning them to stay back, and I slowly crept forward, listening.

"We have enough striped ponies, right?" one of them said. "We have…" she beat her hoof on the floor eight times. "That many."

"No, we have this many," another said, hoof-tapping seven times. "The scrawny one died when they went through the pink below, remember?"

"All the striped ponies are scrawny," the first complained. "Let us just take those we have and leave this Goddess-forsaken place."

There was something odd about the way they referred to themselves. Hell, the whole conversation was bizarre.

"We hate it here…" a third alicorn spoke up.

I froze, realizing a whole damn wing of the creatures was in the room right next to me. I started to back up, trying to think of another way around. We couldn't fight them, particularly not in such cramped quarters. We were thoroughly fucked.

"…This Goddess-forsaken place makes us remember things. I hate remembering things," the third voice continued, and all at once I realized why their voices sounded strange. I wasn't hearing them in my head. Just with my ears. "Last night, I remembered I used to be a buck."

Luna spank my withers! The Pink Cloud was messing with their telepathy! They were cut off from Goddess' influence here. No wonder Trixie needed *us* as her agents in Canterlot.

Then the other hoof fell. The Canterlot Ruins were supposed to be full of alicorns. And those alicorns didn't know we were supposed to be friendlies. We were all sorts of fucked.

I turned back, motioning the others back down the hall.

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Twenty-Nine:

Today was an amazing day.

After two more store owners refused to speak to me about the starmetal, I finally located the ceremonial mask shop and met with the proprietor. This time, I was cautious not to produce or even mention knowledge of the metal, instead asking about zebra legends surrounding the meteor showers, explaining away my curiosity with my cutie mark.

In return, the old zebra mare told me plenty, albeit in hushed tones and only after pulling me into a back room and closing up her store.

She spoke of how the zebras believe that the stars themselves are the visible avatars of unholy entities so unfathomable that our minds would crack should we perceive more than a notion of them. Beings of such primordial and loathsome will that all the evils of our world are no match for their vileness and cruelty.

Much of this I had heard before, but not in so chilling a fashion nor with such utter conviction.

Amongst the most interesting of her tales was the story thousands of *years old, telling of one of the first zebra cities and how it was destroyed by several meteor impacts during the earliest recorded meteor shower. The city had been the zebra's hub of trade and politics, and its destruction plunged the nation into hundreds of years of tribal civil wars.*

I do believe that the events of this tale, if true, represent the historical roots of what has become the dominant zebra mythology.

I had settled down on a park bench near the Celestia fountain (a zebra's rather hoof-forward way of saying "we're Equestrians too", I suspect) when one of those huge, new-model whirligigs – a Griffinchaser V – descended out of Canterlot, landing on the far side of the Zebratown commons. Now despite my position as Royal Astronomer, I had never actually seen one of the Ministry Mares. Today, I saw two. Fluttershy, Mare of the Ministry of Peace emerged from the passenger compartment along with eight other ponies, five of whom were carrying pink suitcases.

Pinkie Pie, Mare of the Ministry of Morale, stepped down from one of the six pedal positions, and ordered the heavily laden ponies to follow her as she marched through the front gate leading to one of the zebra huts, opened the door and went inside. Fluttershy politely requested the company of the remaining three and departed straight for the hospital.

Half an hour later, Pinkie Pie's five ponies emerged from the house, stowed their suitcases in the Griffinchaser, and began going door-to-door throughout the neighborhood. Not long after, Pinkie Pie herself emerged from the house, closing the door behind her, trotting up to the front gate, and planting something at the base of the gate underneath netting designed to look like dirt. Then kicked dirt onto it for good measure.

Then, the Mare of the Ministry of Morale proceeded to disguise herself as a trash can… with a fake beard. I must admit that it was amusing.

I will admit that I allowed my curiosity to get the better of me. I sat on that bench for over an hour, watching the bearded trash can watch the empty and apparently booby-trapped hut. My patience was rewarded when Fluttershy and her ponies returned, escorting a happily stunned zebra couple as their little filly dodged about their legs. I had not seen the filly until after she had been horribly burned, and it is doubtful that I would have recognized her even if I had, as zebras all tend to look alike. But it was not difficult to deduce who the filly must be.

Likewise, it became swiftly evident that the hut invaded by the Ministry of Morale earlier was her home. Even then, I was not ready for the explosion triggered when the little filly stepped onto Pinkie Pie's concealed pressure plate.

I suspect they will be cleaning up confetti from the Zebratown commons for weeks. Not to mention streamers from several of the rooftops. The little filly was utterly delighted… after she crawled out *from behind her parents' hooves. (The blast of trumpets nearly had me cowering under the bench.)*

Zebras poured out of nearby huts, although I was not sure how many did so on account of the invitation and how many were just trying to make sure the town wasn't being bombed. But the vast majority of them joined in the festivities regardless.

It all brought a smile to my face. Even if zebra fillies have a very different preference for party music than a proper Canterlot pony. The only one, in fact, who was not smiling was Pinkie Pie herself. But I suspect that may have been because she had thrown such an amazing party and didn't have the time to stay and enjoy it. The two Ministry Mares and their company were lifting into the air on that six-peddle-pony flyer before the filly had even gotten to cut the cake.

* * *

I crouched at the lock of the Zebratown Police Station's contraband vault, thinking as I worked:

Pinkie Pie took surprise parties to a whole new level.

I found myself thinking of the party trap on the roof of the G.R.H.A.S. building, wondering what sort of party she might have been setting up. A "welcome back, sorry the alligators bit your leg" party for one of the hatchery's staff, perhaps? Or merely a birthday party for somepony working there? Or maybe just a birthday party for one of the alligators? I shook my head. No, I couldn't imagine even Pinkie Pie throwing a party for an alligator. That would just be silly.

The tumblers moved into place, and the door opened. I stepped inside, turning on the light of my PipBuck and taking a deep breath as I enjoyed the stale but pink-free air inside.

My eyes fell on all the weapons and I stopped, stunned.

"Whoa! Nelly!" Calamity whispered. I could only nod. I was pretty sure the zebras were never supposed to have this kind of armament. If the ponies of Canterlot had ever had any idea that the striped Equestrian citizens just beneath them were stockpiling something like *this*…

"They was fixin' t' fend off an invasion," Calamity said softly.

Xenith nodded. "Most likely, they feared the ponies of Canterlot would eventually come for them."

"The guns are in real bad condition," Calamity said regretfully, "But Ah reckon Ah could fix up some right good ones out of the parts… maybe 'bout two dozen."

"Take them all," I said, suddenly getting an idea. I started unlocking one of the weapons lockers. "Everything you can repair into something good."

A moment later, I had the locker open and was staring at the… thing inside. "What is this?"

Xenith peeked over my shoulder and said simply, "Balefire Egg Launcher."

A *WHAT?!* I rocked on my hooves.

Sure enough, one of the ammo boxes I unlocked later held several barefire eggs.

Taking them, I floated up the B.E.L.

"I'll be right back," I told the others before creeping back into the pink. A few minutes later, I had made my way back to the hall doorway. The alicorns were still talking inside.

I stepped around the corner as S.A.T.S. activated, and was pleased to see one of the alicorns was a purple one with a recognizable set of wounds.

"Gotcha!"

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirty-Two:

I received an official decree from Princess Luna today in response to my latest reports. By this document of authority, signed by the Princess Herself, the local constabulary is required to let me interview any prisoner in its custody.

I noticed an oddness about the town. It was as if the entire place was abandoned. All the stores were mysteriously closed. I proceeded directly to the Zebratown Police Station, only to find the doors shut and locked from the inside. It occurred to me that today must be some zebra holiday. Considering the dark and ominous tones to most of their mythology, it does stand to reason that their holidays would be somber and fearful affairs. Although even then, the closing of the police offices seems exceptional. Ponies would never shut down vital services just because of a date on a calendar.

* * *

In my dream, I was Littlepip the zebra. I trotted about the zebra city… not Zebratown which attempted to blend zebra heritage with Equestrian aesthetics, but a real zebra city. A city formed in a hillside forest, the trees themselves molded into homes and buildings after their roots had been tended with the most ancient and sacred of magical brews. The homes were marked with masks of friendship and welcome. There were no fences. Just carvings blessing the home and warding off monsters. Gardens of vegetables and herbs stretched around each home, and flasks hung from the branches. I wasn't sure how I knew this is what a proper zebra city looked like (Be Smart!), but I *knew* it all the same.

I looked up at the bright starry night and smiled at the moon. My eyes caught a streak in the sky. I blinked, unsure of what I had seen.

But then there was another. One of the stars had fallen from the sky!

I heard gasps and murmurs from the other zebras around me. I had not been the only one to see it. Other zebras, my friends and neighbors, were staring up into the sky. Their eyes were wide as more stars fell, some of them streaking through the air towards us before winking out.

One particularly bright star fell from the heavens and did not wink out. Instead, it slammed into our forest village in a flash of light and sound and dirt, blasting apart homes and shaking the ground beneath us.

The stars were attacking us!

Another star fell from the sky, tearing a great fiery swath through the city, murdering dozens of my fellow zebras. Now there was panic. The streets were filled with my neighbors as they fled their huts, not knowing which way to run.

I felt the ground shake from another impact. The forest was burning now. I looked up, horrified, my hooves refusing to move as if I was glued to the ground. Another star, the brightest yet, tore from its rightful place in the night sky, shooting down right at me…

* * *

I awoke with a gasp!

I looked around at the rubble. Blowing up the three alicorns with a balefire egg was delicious overkill. One of them had even been fast enough to get her damned shield up before I could fire. Didn't help one damned bit.

But I had been unprepared for how big the explosion would be. I'd been cautious, aiming for the wall behind the alicorns. That wall was no longer there. Nor was the floor or ceiling. The room that the alicorns had occupied, as well as the rooms to each side, had become a gaping maw open to the rain.

I had fired and dived back behind the wall. That wall had blown into the hallway, collapsing, trapping me between it and the other. I checked the medical assist spell and was surprised to find that, while battered and bruised, nothing was broken. I was lucky that I wasn't a smear.

I looked around. The B.E.L. lay crushed under a chunk of wall. It was worthless now, although Calamity might be able to strip parts from it to repair another should we ever find one. I concentrated, wrapping the concrete chunk in a levitation field and lifting it away. I took the B.E.L., then used my levitation to make the broken wall weightless and pushed it away.

I was dragging myself out from under the floating rubble when Pyrelight landed next to me, Calamity and Xenith not far behind. Calamity was dragging a huge sack full of weapons.

* * *

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirty-Five:

> *This is no holiday. For three days, Zebratown has been like a ghost town for me. For three days I have sought audience with the constabulary, and for three days I have been denied.*
>
> *I know there are zebras here. I can see their shadows moving behind their windows. I spotted one zebra mare pulling her welcome mat inside before slamming and locking the door at my approach. Another hurried her filly indoors, her expression aghast as the foal attempted to smile at me. The horror. The horror.*
>
> *Enough is enough. I have an official decree from Princess Luna herself, and I am going to wait outside this door until I am recognized.*

We waited at the bottom of the stairwell for Calamity. Our pegasus friend was using the gaping hole I had blown in the side of the police station to fly out and stash everything he and Xenith had taken from the vault.

Calamity had been right. The prisoners were not in this part of the Zebratown Police Station. I had scouted the rest of it with Pyrelight after assuring my friends that I was not as bad off as I looked. We found a few medical boxes in the station's bathrooms, and a few boxes of ammo, but no more alicorns and no zebra prisoners. They were in the other section. To get to them, we had to cross to the other section through the basement.

Xenith drank one of the three healing potions I had scavenged, letting it work on the zombie bite. She caught me watching her and smiled. "Fear not, little one. I will be fine. It is good that you cannot catch zombie from a bite, no?"

I nodded. Still, something in her expression felt off to me.

You do not have try to rescue them just because one of them is my daughter. Nor because you feel you need to make up for the cannibal town.

Wait, had she actually tried to talk me out of doing this? I turned to my zebra friend, asking cautiously, "Are you all right with us doing this?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, not following my train of thought.

"Rescuing your daughter," I said carefully. "You want to do this, right?"

Xenith glared at me a moment. But then her expression softened. "Yes, of course I do. I wish my daughter to be safe." Then, dropping her voice, she admitted, "I just do not know if I am ready to do this."

"What do you mean?" Okay, this place was bad. There were all manner of ways to die here. But this morning I had seen Xenith leap from a flying passenger wagon onto the back of a bloodwing in an effort to save people. It didn't seem like Xenith to be afraid of charging into danger with us.

"If I save her," Xenith said simply. "I am responsible for her again."

I remembered all those things I had dismissed as crazy zebra logic. But to my friend, they were not crazy at all. This was how things were in her world, and she was feeling cornered by impending responsibility that she didn't believe she deserved or could handle.

"Xenith, we have to." I explained lamely. "We can't let them die, even if rescuing them costs us something we aren't ready to give."

"I know that, little one. It does not make this any easier."

I nodded. "Then try to put it out of your mind for now. Focus on what we have to do, and we'll deal with the consequences when they come."

Calamity returned.

I unlocked the basement door and pushed it open with a hoof.

The basement was *full* of Pink Cloud.

"Crap."

I closed the door again, taking a few breaths. Then looked at Calamity, Xenith and Pyrelight. "Ready for this?"

Day Thirty-Six:

I waylaid one of the constables as she attempted to sneak home after her shift. Cornered, the zebra mare admitted that word had spread throughout town. Every zebra now knew that I was in possession of starmetal; worse, they had somehow surmised that it was a fragment of Nightmare Moon's armor which I had brought with me from Canterlot.

I was immediately anxious, knowing that the proliferation of this information would put the valuable heirloom entrusted to me in great danger of theft! The next words of the striped constable, however, revealed that the reverse was true. No zebra would be willing to venture close to the "accursed" chunk of meteor metal, nor would they abide my presence due to my association with the heirloom. Insanely, in the zebra mind, my "prolonged exposure" means that I am somehow contaminated, as if I have contracted a dangerously communicable disease. No stores will do business with me. I am unofficially but quite effectively shunned.

It is just a damned piece of metal!

Thrusting my papers into the zebra's face, I dragged her back to the station and demanded that she facilitate my access to the prisoner. I will admit to having been perhaps excessively loud and more physically forceful than is befitting a pony of breeding, but my efforts did provoke a response. Finally, the head of the constabulary opened the door, if only enough to poke out his head between the heavy chains that prevented me from forcing the door open farther. He took one look at my papers, agreed to the authority they provided me, but "regretfully" informed me that the prisoner had slain himself two nights before and would not be speaking with anyone, pony or zebra.

I was not satisfied. I demanded to see the body for myself. I suspected that the zebra was lying. Or worse, I suspected foul play to prevent me from speaking with the captive zebra.

To my surprise, the head of the constabulary capitulated. He withdrew and closed the door. I could hear the chains being removed. When he opened it again, all the constables had left the room. I saw them watching from adjacent rooms like nervous foals peering into the darkness under their bed.

The head constable led me through the Zebratown Police Station, unlocking the door into the dimly lit stairwell. We descended, passing by the floor containing the normal cell blocks and plunging farther down until we were in a sub-basement where the iron behemoth of their boiler was held. Beyond it, across from the coal room, was a small room, no bigger than a closet, with a heavy iron door. Inset into the door was a small, barred window of thick glass through which I could look into the shadowed chamber.

I could see the prisoner. They zebras had not moved him. They had, I *am inclined to assume, been unwilling to even open the door, much less share a space with the body of the striped inside. I could not make out the writing on the wall but I immediately knew he had painted the scrawling letters in his own blood. I recoiled as my gaze fell upon him, certain without doubt that the zebra had taking his own life in a fit of insanity. He had chewed through his own forehooves, continuing to gnaw, muzzle pressed into his own blood, until they were attached to his forelegs by only thin strips of meat. I have no idea what unholy drive allowed him to survive long enough to do the same to both of them.*

* * *

The cell was midway through the basement. By the time we reached it, my heart was threatening to seize and my lungs refused to work. My head was being ripped apart and my flesh felt like it was trying to peel away from my meat. I couldn't make it to the far end and I couldn't make it back, but the cell was free of the pink. All I had to do was unlock it.

I fumbled, screaming in agony, and tried again. My companions pressed close, dying.

This time, the door opened. We all stumbled inside.

The torture melted away, but my E.F.S. was flashing all the worst messages. Without healing potions, we couldn't go back out. And we only had two left.

Two of us would have to stay behind, trapped in this cell until the others could get back with healing supplies.

"You two go ahead," Calamity rasped, waving a wing limply at Xenith and me. I opened my muzzle to argue, but he pushed it shut with his hoof. "It's yer mission more'n mine, an' it's only proper y'all should be the ones t' see it through. 'Sides, you two are the be best skilled fer jailbreakin' anyhoo."

Xenith wobbled, looking stricken. "No, it…" Then she stopped, her eyes going horribly wide, all the remaining color draining from the skin beneath her coat. She wasn't staring at Calamity. Her eyes were locked on the wall behind him. I nudged past my pegasus friend and looked at the wall. There were words there, scrawled in the rusty color of blood. But the words were strange, the letters in no language I knew.

"Xenith, what is it?"

"A prophecy," she intoned softly. "In the old language of our people." Swallowing, she slowly read, a tremble in her voice:

By the light of Our stars, We illuminate your end,
And shine on the graves of all zebra kind.
A hundred thousand Nightmares will descend upon you,
The armies of Our Dark Child will fill the skies,
And foes from impenetrable cities will fall upon all your lands,
Shielded by armor crafted from their very souls.
Rejoice with Us. For every single one of you shall die.

I froze, transfixed to this spot, a slow bubble of horrified realization crawling up into my mind from the blackest abyss.

The prophecy was wrong. It was a *lie.*

But surely, as much as the zebras loathed anything they associated with the stars, surely a prophecy like this would have gotten back to the zebras' Caesar and the religious leaders of their land. I'd seen Four Stars. I knew there were zebras loyal to the homeland and ponies loyal to their cause. This would have gotten back…

And when the zebras saw megaspells and alicorn shields, would they not have made the same assumption as Fluttershy did about how the spells could be used to protect entire cities?

When they learned The Black Book had fallen into Rarity's hooves, and even heard her suggest using soul jars to create invincible armor, would they be able to believe that she would abandon the project?

How about the new pegasi armor? And how would they react if they discovered what Twilight Sparkle was up to?

The prophecy was a tailor-made doomsday lie designed to drive the zebras to the worst possible extremes.

But… how did the zebra know? How could he predict, twisted and distorted, things that were not even set into motion until after his death? The acquisition of The Black Book, in fact, was set into motion by his capture.

How…? Okay, it wasn't impossible. I had seen precognition-level abilities before. Maybe the stars… or something… gave the zebra something equivalent to Pinkie Pie's unusual senses? Maybe it was some influence from The Black Book, or spells that had been woven into it after it was turned into a soul jar? Maybe the zebra had been on Mint-als… or something more potent than Mint-als. The zebras were the ones who created those drugs after all, right? Or maybe…

Maybe…

Maybe it didn't matter. No, not maybe. It *didn't* matter.

The constables here had been so terrified of this insane zebra they hadn't been willing to unlock the door to remove the body. I looked down; and sure enough, the skeleton was still here. Midnight Shower hadn't been able to see the entire prophecy from the window. Perhaps no one ever did. It was entirely possible that we were the very first people to see the writing on the wall.

And the worst part was, it didn't matter. Even if this prophecy never made it out of this room, the zebras didn't need it. The Ministry of Magic had cracked the zebras' Bypass magic just a few mere weeks before the end, and already they were using it to create shields that only specific individuals could get through. Twilight Sparkle was starting pony testing of the alicorn-creating I.M.P. formula the very day of the strikes. Once those advances happened, it was only a matter of time before Equestria had impenetrable defenses and an army of advanced alicorn fighters… and the zebras would lose.

The zebras had already lost. Equestria had won. It was only a matter of playing it out. Checkmate in a predictable number of moves. And if the zebras truly believed that there was no possibility of surviving a surrender, that they were facing annihilation or worse under Nightmare Moon… and they *did* truly believe that… then the only move left was to blow up the board.

The zebras didn't see any other choice.

From the Journal of Midnight Shower

Day Thirty-Six, addendum:

I am almost finished packing. There is no point pursuing my research here. I will get no more cooperation from the zebras of Zebratown. To my dismay, not even Daisy will respond to my knocking, although I suppose she could legitimately be out of town. It does not matter.

I have sent a message ahead to Princess Luna, informing her of my failure and my imminent return. I have ordered a royal chariot to pick me up in just under two hours. That should be enough to pack up this terminal and the last of my possessions. I want to be rid of this place and back in my own bed before midnight.

And there is the knock on the door. It would appear my ride is early. Well, they will have to wait. But I will not make them wait long.

And now they have upgraded their knocking to banging. Now I worry that Princess Luna is disappointed with me and wishes to see me before I have time to pack. Or perhaps they have invitations to a soirée in Canterlot and fear I will make them unfashionably late. Doesn't matter. I've decided that I don't really need a lot of this junk anyway. I can always buy new things once I am back in the lap of a society of reasonable ponies. Actually, all I really need are those things already in my bags, as well as the heirloom's lockbox and this terminal. I will be ready to go as soon as I have finished writing this entry and I have shut…

⁂

Xenith and I gazed upwards. The entire stairwell on this side of the building had collapsed, taking a fair bit of each floor with it. We were at the nadir of a four-story pit, looking upwards through where ceilings and floors used to be. Three floors up, we could see a jail cell and the young adult zebras trapped inside… barely. The cell was behind a shield being generated by two familiar dark-green alicorns sitting in front of it like guards, unmoving, unblinking.

On the floor above, three more alicorns stood watch.

Well, at least the Pink Cloud hadn't seeped into this part of the building and become trapped here. I was still getting nasty medical warnings on my E.F.S., despite having found a couple more healing potions in the constable's locker room medical box and imbibed one. Xenith drank the other. I felt slightly bad for not saving it, but by the time the two of us made it out of the basement, we couldn't have rescued any zebras. If we hadn't found those two potions, we would be needing rescue ourselves.

I really hated the Pink Cloud.

Five alicorns. Fuck. I should have seen this coming. Alicorns normally work in groups of three. There were three in the other wing. One on the roof. That meant at least two more, and five made even more sense. How the hell were we supposed to do this? There was no way to sneak up to the cage. And we were hardly in prime fighting condition.

I was working on a brilliant plan. I almost had the start of one when I heard Xenith gasp softly.

"Xephyr!"

I eeped in surprise as Xenith's teeth bit down on my mane and she threw me onto her back. The zebra charged into view of the alicorns, shouting a battle cry.

One after the other, the three alicorns ignited their shields and jumped down, swooping towards us.

Xenith turned and ran… but not far. "Hold on, little one!" I wrapped my forehooves around her tightly, wondering what she intended to do. She spun, lowering her horn, and started charging to meet the closest of the alicorns as it sped towards her.

"You're… kidding, right?"

At the last moment, Xenith leapt. The zebra sailed through the air with me clinging to her back for dear life. Her hooves hit the alicorn's shield and pushed off of it, keeping momentum, leaping to the next, then the third.

The zebra landed on the third floor in front of the two green alicorns; I was still hugging her tightly, looking back down at the three utterly surprised alicorns who had just been used as jumping platforms.

Xenith reared and slashed her head to one side then the other, slicing her hellhound horn through the throats of the two alicorns in front of her. The shield dropped.

"Open the door, little one!" she demanded. "Hurry."

I blinked, still feeling stunned, and slid off her back. I reached out with my magic, picking the lock on the cell door with casual ease. The alicorns below us were shaking off their surprise and soaring back up towards us.

"Do you have any more of those memory orbs, little one?"

I nodded. "Yes, but they… won't fall for the…" But these alicorns were cut off. They *might* just fall for the same trick! "Stand back," I warned.

Xenith dove past me into the cell, pulling off her satchel and dumping its contents before the wide-eyed younger zebra bucks and mares. As I floated out all the memory orbs I had, I heard her say "The ones like this one… each of you take one and put it on. Swiftly."

The alicorns were flying up at us. Staring down through the ruins at them, I flung the memory orbs into the abyss, yelling "Balefire eggs for every monster! Yay!"

The three alicorns scattered.

Behind me, I heard the young zebras suddenly start crying out in sharp pain! I spun around, turning my back to the chasm in alarm. "What…?"

I stopped, stunned yet again, not believing my eyes.

And some of the zebras have magic fetishes that can allow them to fly, Rarity's voice chimed sweetly in the back of my mind, speaking to the three bucks harassing Rainbow Dash. *If you think it's impossible for an earth-bound mare to fly her way into Cloudsdayle with the right magic, you have tragically short memories.*

All eight of the zebras in front of me, including Xenith herself, had grown large, bat-like wings.

"Wow… that's… when did you?…" My gaze fell to the strange talisman hanging from

Xenith's neck, formed in part from an inhaler, and the identical ones worn by each of the other zebras, several of whom were still wiggling and writhing as their wings grew in. I realized what the bloodwing strips were for.

Xenith smiled at me with feigned innocence.

"You realize those are kinda creepy, right?" I finally said, smiling just a touch.

* * *

Once again, I was riding Xenith's back, this time with my forelegs wrapped about her neck as her wings flapped to either side of me. Rain cascaded over us, soaking us both. The seven other zebras were soaring behind us.

We had a slight head start. But none of this lot were anything more than the most novice of fliers. The same could not be said for the three alicorns pursuing us. They swooped up out of the Zebratown Police Station behind us, tossing up their shields as soon as they were airborne.

Bright light and thunder cracked the air, and one of the zebras screamed as an alicorn lightning spell struck him. He fell from the sky, trailing smoke. "No!" I lashed out with my magic, grasping him in a telekinetic net, and drawing him back towards us… but the young zebra was already dead.

Whooooooooosh!

Twin missiles launched from somewhere in the Zebratown ruins below, striking against one of the alicorn shields. The monster turned her attention to SteelHooves.

The Zebratown Police Station exploded.

The blast tore upwards through the larger half of the police station, rending the building apart. The force of the blast slammed into the three alicorns, causing their shields to fail and knocking the one diving towards SteelHooves out of the sky.

The shockwave hit us, and Xenith lost control. Behind us, I heard SteelHooves taking full advantage of the alicorns' moment of vulnerability. I threw my magic around Xenith, myself and the six surviving zebras, pulling up, trying to soften the crash.

We landed in the amphitheatre lake with a percussion of hard splashes.

I gasped, struggling to paddle my way to the surface, no better at swimming than Velvet Remedy. My head broke the surface once, barely. I sucked in a mixture of air and water as a wave hit across my muzzle.

The last thing I saw was a swirling burst of green and gold flashing in the sky over where the Zebratown Police Station used to be.

* * *

"You. Did. *WHAT?!"* Velvet Remedy shrieked.

The rain had finally stopped, leaving the wasteland cool, grey and wet. There were no rainbows, but the air had a fresh smell that was utterly pleasant.

It was our second day back. We had arrived late in the evening, just after the rainstorm ended. Our return was heralded with surprise and celebration amongst the zebras of Glyphmark, but we spent the night sleeping and the morning recovering and (metaphorically) licking our wounds. I had wanted a funeral for the two zebras that we failed to save, but the Glyphmark zebras didn't want to spoil the first bright moment in their recent lives with thoughts of mourning. Instead, we turned our efforts to helping this town in the ways we could before we left. This time, I wasn't helping those in need only to walk away.

Calamity looked up from the military robot he was repairing and tipped up his hat. "Ah blew up the big ol' boiler they had in the basement."

SteelHooves worked alongside Calamity, accessing the robot with his magically-powered armor through a PipBuck technician tool I had let him borrow. The Applejack's Ranger was reprogramming each of the robots in the Angel lot that Calamity could get working right, turning them into guards for the town of Glyphmark.

Velvet Remedy stammered, looking utterly aghast.

"Hey, Ah knew Ah couldn't make it t' either o' the exits, but Ah figured Ah could make it the three yards from the cell t' the boiler, throw all the right switches and turn all the right knobs, and make it back t' the cell before keelin' over." He grinned sheepishly, adding, "An' y'know, open the furnace up so Pyrelight could fly inside."

Pyrelight cooed happily. Of the lot of us, she was the best for wear, having been nicely incinerated in a fire of her own making.

"Why?"

"Well, Ah figured Li'lpip an' Xenith had their saddles full as it was, an' we didn't want anypony gettin' dead tryin' t' save us," Calamity explained. "So Ah thought, hey, a boiler explosion is mostly steam, ain't it? And we seen how the rain washes away the Pink Cloud, so Ah reckoned a steam explosion would clear the basement o' Cloud right quick."

"But… you could have been *killed!"*

"Well, the cell looked real sturdy. Ah figured it would hold." Calamity grinned, blushing. "Course, we got a helluva bigger bang than Ah was expectin'. Good thing the blast mostly went straight up."

"That's *INSANE!"* Velvet Remedy stomped, trapped between relief that Calamity was alive and the desire to strangle him for enacting such a reckless plan.

The soft voice of Xephyr intoned, "That is the friend of yours whose name is *Calamity,* right?"

Xenith trotted past Calamity with Xephyr and several of the other town zebras in tow. Her daughter stared at the pegasus as they passed and Calamity tipped his hat forward and bowed. "Pleased t' meetcha, Miss Xephyr!"

Xenith was leading the group of zebras down into the labs beneath Angel Bunny Pharmaceuticals. I wasn't sure how I felt about Xenith teaching the town of Glyphmark how to manufacture Dash, but I had given in to her argument that the town needed something they could sell to merchants in exchange for food and supplies. This was her way of trying to be responsible for them.

We were losing Xenith, but only for a short while. She was going to stay behind in Glyphmark, spending some time with her daughter and helping the Glyphmark tribe while the rest of us tackled the Canterlot Ruins.

The Canterlot Ghoul paused in his work, looking up at Calamity. "How did you know the boiler would still work?"

"Kinda countin' on it not workin' right, actually. That's kinda how ya get 'em t' explode.”

Velvet turned and hissed at Pyrelight, “I can’t believe you would take part in something so… so… *insane!”*

The balefire phoenix looked slightly abashed but no less proud of herself. Velvet Remedy tossed her mane back, stuck her nose in the air and harrumphed.

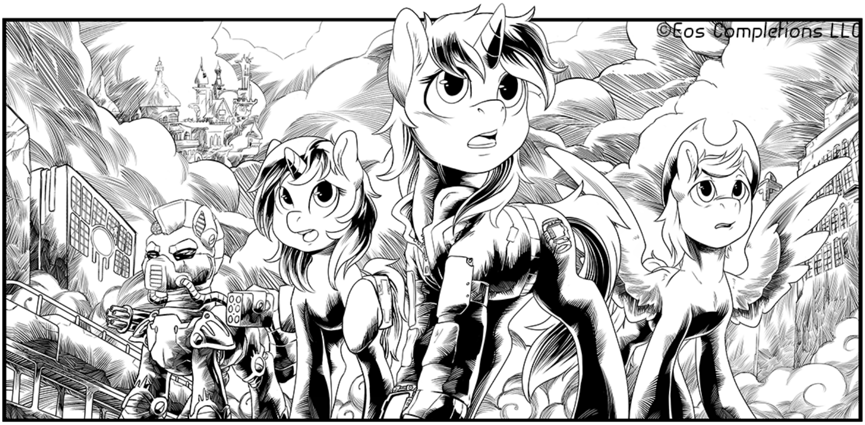
I listened to them, a smile on my face. Then turned back to the zebras standing in a line next to me. Each was wielding one of the firearms Calamity had rebuilt from the mess of weapons we had scavenged from the police station’s contraband vault. “Now watch closely,” I instructed, beginning their first lesson on marksmanship and firearm safety.

They looked at me intently, eager to learn how to defend themselves and their town. For the first time in the Goddesses knew how long, there was a sense of hope in Glyphmark.

Footnote: Maximum Level

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The Shadow of the Ministries



"Come here, Stable Dweller. There are things you should know."

Finally!

At long last, I have reached this point in the story. And, at this point, I beg your permission to take a little liberty with the telling of it.

It had been a long and winding road getting to Canterlot, and I still have to tell of the difficulties and discoveries that faced us there. The most vital of those discoveries was the six memory orbs – the final memory orbs – which I found there. In those memories, the veils began to part, showing me my true place in this world, my purpose in life, and how everything was going to end.

I finally got my first glimpse of my own destiny.

That it took so long is probably exasperating, and you might wonder why I didn't skip to this part sooner. (In truth, I have skipped over a fair bit, trying to tell you only the parts of my adventures that were important or exciting enough to keep you reading.) I have told you these things, I suppose, for the same reason that Princess Luna told Her story to Midnight Shower: context.

Only with the proper context can you see how meaningful those memories were, and how they set my hooves on the path that ended with me coming here and doing what I am about to do.

For all that, there was a long and brutal journey still ahead of me. I had only seen glimpses. I had not found my virtue. I did not understand my role in this world. And I was utterly unaware of the war about to descend on us all.

I did not view them until our time in Canterlot was over. And I feel it would be too much to tell of them all at once. Too much for me, at least, to try to relive them all in order like that. So with your indulgence, I will diverge from proper chronology and scatter my telling of those memories throughout the much longer story of our experiences in Canterlot.

Thank you for bearing with me on this.

* * *

"That's awfully fast," Calamity commented, staring at the light pink mist that was already filling the streets of Canterlot as we looked down on it from high above. The steady rain had washed the Pink Cloud out of the air in the days before, and yet the Cloud was dense enough to tint the air merely half a day later.

Most of the city was built from stone carved from the very mountain Canterlot embraced. Cobblestone streets had been lined with elegant structures formed from stone and mortar or magically molded rock. Most buildings of stone still stood, although cracked and crumbling from the weight of unnatural ages. As we flew by, a three-story tower, once an upscale inn, collapsed with a deep-throated rumble, sending up curling swirls of pink-tinted stone dust. Everything more susceptible to the entropy of the Cloud had been reduced to rust and rubble, smears and stains that once signified objects, and decrepit structures stained pink and falling apart at the seams.

Oddly, some of the most preserved things were those which had once been alive. The black and twisted forms of dead trees lined streets filled with dark, pink-rotted bones, many of which had partially sunk into the discolored cobblestones.

The only other place that looked eerily preserved was the cluster of buildings that had once formed the heart of Equestria, from a scattering of white-stoned towers to the royal castle itself.

And the colored mist had settled everywhere, faint in the air below us, thicker on the streets and between the still-standing structures.

"It will get worse with each passing hour," SteelHooves warned us. "By morning, the Pink Cloud will have returned to its full strength."

I pressed my lips together in determination before saying, "Won't be a problem. After Zebratown, I'm not going to spend any longer here than absolutely necessary."

One of the things our experiences in Zebratown had made very clear was that the threat posed by the Pink Cloud was directly proportional to its concentration. We had spent hours in the light haze of Cloud that persisted in the Zebratown Police Station with only minor health problems. Nothing that couldn't be remedied by a health potion and some time in fresh air. The places where the Pink Cloud pooled thickly, however, were lethal beyond even SteelHooves' descriptions of it.

"We're going to land right in front of the Ministry of Image, dash in and grab what we came for," I told my companions. "Then we gallop to the Ministry of Awesome, get what we need from it and go. With any luck, we'll be in and out in under an hour."

We had spent the earlier parts of the day helping Glyphmark. (Even now, Xenith was still down there imparting all she could about zebra stealth techniques to the young adult zebras… at least, in such a short amount of time.) Now the sun was setting, dipping below the clouds to paint the world in hues of fiery orange and bloody red. We hoped to take some advantage of the impending darkness.

"Are you sure this place wasn't hit?" Velvet Remedy asked, observing the level of damage that was evident throughout the city. "Is all that just from age?"

"The entropic effect of the Pink Cloud speeds decay," SteelHooves noted. "If the city were not made largely of stone, it would have crumbled to dust long ago. Only the mystically protected places are significantly intact."

"Ah reckon a fair bit o' damage was done by the explosion when the shield came down too," Calamity commented as he circled at a safe height, drawing us over the outlying city and towards the castle itself.

"I thought the missiles had stopped striking after the Pink Cloud went off?"

"Ayep, that's how Ah heard it too, but that ain't the explosion Ah'm thinkin' of," Calamity explained. "Remember, the megaspell pumped enough o' that Cloud inta Canterlot t' make the air look solid pink. And it weren't like the shield weren't fulla air t' begin with…"

Of course. The air pressure in Canterlot would have been… well, I'm not sure how high, but it would have been pretty high. No wonder the Pink Cloud seeped into every surface it touched to the extreme which it did.

"…Ah expect the moment the shield went down, there was one helluva… well, ya saw it, SteelHooves. Am Ah right?"

"I didn't notice," SteelHooves said with a morose defiance. "I was a little too focused on the falling wave of pink water."

I reviewed what we had learned from our so-called "dry run for Canterlot" in Zebratown. (Beyond the fact that SteelHooves and I disagree on what "dry" means.)

The greatest danger we expected to face in Canterlot was the Pink Cloud itself, but the interior of the Zebratown Police Station wasn't much different than Canterlot right now, and so I was highly confident that we would be fine so long as we minimized our exposure. Likewise, while we knew that the Pink Cloud had the potential to fuse objects to flesh (or each other), that only seemed to be a concern while within the highest concentrations, at which point such fusions were the very least of our health concerns.

As such, I announced that I was going in wearing my armor and PipBuck.

"Ah'm gonna put on muh battle saddle the moment we touch down," Calamity responded.

"That is a foolish choice," SteelHooves retorted, pointing out, "If you insist on taking the risk of wearing armor, your Enclave Armor not only offers a much higher degree of protection, but its magical energy weapons are far more suitable for battling some of the dangers we are most likely to face."

Our Canterlot Ghoul's words reminded me of one of the more painful lessons from Zebratown: my combat skills were almost worthless here. The two enemies we were most likely to face were Canterlot "zombies" and alicorns. None of my weapons were worth a damn against the latter once they got up their shields, or against the former at all. In order to stop a Canterlot Ghoul, I'd not only have to take them down, but then run up and hack off their head somehow. Unfortunately, bullets don't tend to decapitate.

"Yeah, Ah know that," Calamity responded stubbornly, "But while Ah know the chances are mighty slim, Ah still ain't takin' the risk that Ah might be fused inta that damned thing." He spat for emphasis.

Our other environmental concern was the broadcasters. SteelHooves warned that any broadcasting system, from PipBuck broadcasters to sprite-bots, were likely to have become twisted into lethal traps, even those inside. Fortunately, he also assured us that we should be normally able to *hear* the damn things before we got into their kill zones. Both of the broadcasters I had fallen victim to before had been underwater, preventing me from hearing them; and both times, I had been traveling swiftly enough that I had been thrust into their deadly area of effect before I could react. Hopefully, traveling cautiously would allow us to avoid such deathtraps while in Canterlot itself.

Returning to his previous observation, Calamity mused, "Still, that's a lot o' Pink Cloud coming back awful fast. Ya sure it's just seepin' back up outta the streets an' such?"

"As opposed to what?" SteelHooves queried.

"As opposed t', Ah dunno, bein' fed somehow," Calamity offered.

SteelHooves flicked his metal-shrouded tail. "You think… that the megaspell… might still be going?" I felt a chill.

"Ah can't reckon how all the Pink Cloud ain't been washed away if it ain't."

That was a deeply unpleasant thought.

Velvet Remedy spoke up, "But that would be insane. If the spell just kept going, it would eventually poison all of Equestria! The zebras couldn't have wanted that!"

No… not even they would have…

I recalled the rumor SteelHooves had mentioned: *after the shield fell, the zebras launched megaspells to finally obliterate the city. But if that is true, then those missiles never reached their destination.*

"It's possible," I offered, "That they might have designed it to function indefinitely just to ensure it would last as long as they needed it too. And because they expected it to be destroyed along with Canterlot shortly after the shield fell." After it had done its job and murdered the Princesses.

Pyrelight let out a mournful note. We flew in silence a few moments more.

* * *

"No!" I said, telekinetically snatching the Fluttershy Orb away from Velvet Remedy as she brought it out of one of her medical boxes. She gasped as the orb floated away from her.

"Littlepip! Give that back," she demanded, her voice lowering.

I frowned but shook my head. "You've been losing yourself in this too much, Velvet. It's really beginning to worry me."

I'd been letting this go for weeks. After all, her reliance on the Fluttershy Orb had seemed to wane after Pyrelight had joined us. But ever since the balefire phoenix had been injured and Velvet Remedy had neglected a dying pony to save her, my unicorn friend had been turning to the orb with even greater frequency than before.

"Excuse me?" Velvet huffed, telekinetically snatching it back. "I'm pretty sure I've spent nowhere near the amount of time lost in memory orbs that you have," she pointed out. "And I've been a lot smarter about when and where to do so."

Ouch. "Okay, true. But at least I'm not viewing the same one over and over and over," I said, trying to sound reasonable. "That can't be healthy."

Velvet frowned. "Because I like this one. No matter how bad it is out here, I can always find solace in Fluttershy." I cringed inside.

"And yes, it is escapism. So is reading a book," she challenged. "Would you be so concerned if I read the same book over and over? We all have our own little things that help us get through the day. And at least mine isn't self-destructive." I could feel her on the verge of bringing up Party-Time Mint-als, but Velvet Remedy reined herself in, not wishing to cut that deep.

Instead, she sighed, "This world is horrible, and I don't seem to be doing a whole lot to make it better. All my friends insist on risking death or dismemberment on a daily basis…"

"I don't," SteelHooves interjected.

"…Yes, well you're being an entirely different problem, aren't you?" Velvet snapped. "My old home was assaulted, those I knew slaughtered, and now we're about to dive into poison at the behest of a psychotic despot who would see the extinction of ponykind. So maybe a little escapism is in order just to keep my sanity."

SteelHooves turned towards me but said nothing. I knew my own reasons for wanting to curb her Fluttershy worship, but this clearly wasn't the way.

"What is that?" Velvet Remedy asked, changing the subject with a point of a hoof. I watched her tuck the orb away before turning to see what had caught her eye.

The setting sun was passing behind a tall, slender, white spire that rose up from the city, taller than the highest tower of the castle and flanked by a pair of marble "wings" easily three stories tall. The light of the sun seemed to ignite a nimbus around the spire as its shadow slashed across us the city below.

"The Celestian Monument," SteelHooves informed us. "Princess Luna had it constructed after Princess Celestia stepped down to honor Her and Her thousand years of peaceful rule."

"Of course. That would be why it's taller than the castle," Velvet Remedy nodded. "Luna was making it clear to everypony that She didn't see Herself as a *replacement* for Celestia."

Beyond the Celestian Monument stretched a lifeless field lined with ugly, dead trees that seemed to reach out of the dirt like grasping, skeletal claws. The field was bordered by broken cobblestone walkways. In the center sank a huge rectangular pool of pink-saturated water. Rising opposite the monument was the royal castle itself, a glorious mass of crumbling spires and cracked white stone.

The field was flanked by the silent sentinels of six preserved buildings standing across from each other like pieces on a chess board – the Ministries, each now a shadow of their regal and impressive former selves. This was Ministry Walk.

"That there's a whole lotta alicorns," Calamity whistled, staring down at the dark forms which swarmed around the far end of Ministry Walk. We had been warned of alicorns in the Canterlot Ruins, but I had assumed they would be scattered about the city. Instead, they amassed in Ministry Walk. It was almost as if something about the castle drew the alicorns close like bugs around a lantern.

So much for setting down in Ministry Walk. They would be all over us before the *Sky Bandit* touched ground, and alicorns were yet another enemy that my skill with firearms was pretty much useless against… at least as soon as they got their damn shields up.

Alicorns were some of the most dangerous and powerful opponents in the Equestrian Wasteland, but at least they had been predictable. The encounter in Zebratown changed all that. In the pink, the alicorns lost their telepathy and their connection with the

Goddess. Here, they were individuals, and their tactics and demeanor radically changed. Logically, I didn't have enough experience to be sure, but my instincts were telling me to expect these alicorns to be more clever than the ones I had fought in Appleloosa and Manehattan. Their individuality would allow for more creative tactical thinking. At the same time, they should be less coordinated.

And, if my suspicions bore out, less *magically* threatening. With the exception of what I had come to think of their breed powers, all alicorns seemed to possess the same spells. But the only spell the alicorns had used in Zebratown, aside from their shields, was a lightning bolt spell… and only one of them had used that. If all of them had possessed the full range of spells normal for alicorns, we should have been slaughtered. Instead, I had come to suspect that the alicorns were all tapping into a common pool of spell knowledge, one granted by the Goddess; and when they lost their connection to her, they lost most of their spells as well.

Too bad the damn shield spell seemed inherent.

"Okay, new plan," I announced. "We land in that cluster of buildings on the opposite side of the Celestian Monument and we sneak our way in, moving quickly from building to building until we reach our targets. SteelHooves, which of those buildings is the Ministry of Awesome?"

"The Ministry of Awesome is the smaller building made of glassy black stone, farthest up, right next to the castle and across from the Ministry of Morale," SteelHooves answered, adding for clarification, "The Ministry of Morale is the one with the mooring tower for Pinkie Pie Balloons."

Right next to the castle. Of course it was.

* * *

I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle as Calamity winged us back around the monument and started to look for a good place to land. Directly behind the monument stretched an assemblage of moderately-preserved structures adorned with golden rooftops. The buildings were littered over a generous expanse of space that I imagined must have been a park. A small river snaked through it, the water tainted by ribbons of pink, terminating at an inner-city lake.

"Here we go, everypony," Calamity called out as he picked a spot and began to shed altitude. I was thankful for Calamity's warning even though there really wasn't anything to do to brace ourselves. Velvet Remedy took a deep breath, apparently intending to hold it while we dropped down through the Pink Cloud.

We dropped into the pink.

The tint of the sky transformed the sunset into something utterly alien, the red and orange hues shifting into sickly, malignant colors. "Yay." Well, even with the change of plans, we should be in and out within just a few hours.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle flashed a location name sent from my PipBuck's automapping spell: Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns.

A cluster of lights flared up on my E.F.S. compass, none of them immediately hostile. I turned my attention in their direction as Calamity flew us down between the rooftops of the tallest buildings. The lights came from one of them. I urged Calamity to fly a little closer.

"Ivory Tower:" my E.F.S. proclaimed as we neared the elegant structure topped with a golden onion. "Graduate Studies."

One of the uppermost floors of the Ivory Tower had boasted a beautiful multi-story window. During the megaspell attack, mounting air pressure had caused the window to implode, and the whole tower had filled with Pink Cloud. As we passed, I could see into what had once been a library, the books all long rotted away. The Ivory Tower had become a pooling place; I could see thick wisps of nearly solid pink floating up the stairs from the chamber below.

Several darkened, reptilian forms slouched about the library, occasionally flexing leathery wings. One of the creatures was curled up in the shattered bowl of what had once been a giant hourglass, snoozing soundly.

Dragons. Canterlot Ghoul-ized adolescent dragons. About Spike's age, I thought as I remembered being trapped in Spike's body, recalling the feel of his wings. They could be his siblings, I realized, trapped forever in under-developed bodies that could not grow and would not die. The sight struck a melancholy cord in my heart. A sad note that continued to play even as three of their corresponding lights shifted to red.

Three of the Canterlot Dragons rounded, watching as we passed, then spread out their wings and launched themselves after us.

SteelHooves reacted immediately, dashing towards the back window of the *Sky Bandit.*

"SteelHooves, wait!" I called out, unsure if my actions were wise, but unwilling to make the mistake of shooting first yet again. "Velvet, you're up!"

Letting out the breath she had been holding, Velvet Remedy jumped to her hooves, flashing me an odd expression as she passed. It was either her way of silently saying "about time" or she was still upset with me over trying to take the Fluttershy Orb.

Velvet's horn glowed softly as SteelHooves stepped aside, making way for her.

"Dragons of Canterlot," her voice boomed, magnified majestically. **"We are but little pony travelers, humbled to be in your magnificent presence. We beseech you to allow us passage through your territory. We promise our visit will be brief and we will be of no bother."**

"Really?" SteelHooves rumbled, his tone making it clear Velvet Remedy's diplomacy couldn't possibly work.

"No," she whispered back. "Not really." She turned back to me, "Sorry about this, Littlepip…"

"FOOD!" one of the dragons bellowed. Great. They ate ponies! Of course they ate ponies. Mister Topaz had been planning a feast.

"Why yes, of course," Velvet Remedy replied. **"I wouldn't think of passing through your home without bringing something to pay the toll."**

With that, she floated out one of the dresses she had bought for me at Tenpony Tower. The only one, I noted, which had several pretty sapphires woven into the hems.

"I'm afraid I only have the one gift, so I do hope you don't mind sharing!" She tossed the garment out of the *Sky Bandit's* back window, and the three dragons immediately scrambled after the gemstone-studded dress.

Turning back around, Velvet Remedy smiled and suggested, "Let's get inside before they finish fighting each other."

* * *

I leapt from the *Sky Bandit* the moment it touched ground, levitating our supplies with us. We had left everything but the essentials back with Xenith at Glyphmark. Calamity released himself from the harness.

"Hey, look," Calamity said, pointing between the nearby buildings at the rubble of *Clip-Clop's Clipboards* a few blocks away. "Maybe we should stop by there on our way back," he suggested as we all began to gallop towards the closest building. "Perfect place to get ablative armor for the *Sky Bandit!"*

"No getting sidetracked… wait, what?" I blinked at Calamity in confusion.

"Ayep! Ain'tcha noticed all the clipboards layin' 'bout everywhere?" Calamity asked, flying alongside us. "Darned things are nigh indestructible!"

I honestly hadn't noticed. But then, I didn't scavenge as relentlessly as Calamity did. Still, clipboards as armor? He had to be joking.

"Made out of pure, compressed Obstinatanium, they is!" Calamity continued. "Betcha not even Li'l Mac could punch a hole in one!"

Obstinatanium? There was no such thing as… oh! I got it now. "Well, sure, the new ones were. But only after they stopped making them out of layered Stubbornite."

"Careful there," SteelHooves grunted. "The Apple family had a monopoly on Stubbornite mines."

Velvet Remedy chased behind us, a confused expression on her face. "I thought they were apple farmers," she whispered to Pyrelight who was flying alongside her.

"Well, shucks," Calamity said, "If some ponies hadn't been hogging all the Stubbornite for 'emselves, maybe they wouldn't 'ave run out like they did."

"I'll have you know that Applejack never once hogged Stubbornite," SteelHooves countered. "She used every bit that she had."

I blinked, mouth hanging open. Did SteelHooves just *make a joke* about Applejack? Wow.

The wave of pain blasted through my head as I reached the steps up to the building door, my E.F.S. flashing the name of the building amidst medical warnings. I felt like there was a vise tightening around my horn. My vision blurred and my ears began to ring.

I stumbled back and the pain immediately faded. "Whoa!" I called out, holding out a foreleg to stop the others behind me. I wasn't fast enough; Calamity didn't stop, flying right over me and slamming through the door.

As soon as the door was open, I could hear the static. Calamity was halfway into the lobby beyond when he landed, staggering, and spun around. I could see blood beginning to seep out of his ears and the corners of his eyes as he turned to look towards us, his face grimacing in pain. Then he looked up above us and bit at the air. I could see his bloodied eyes widen as he realized he wasn't wearing his battle saddle. Wobbling, he shouted out, pointing above the door. "Li'lpip! There!" He toppled to his knees.

I dashed inside, drawing Little Macintosh from its holder, ignoring the explosions of pain in my head and the sudden tint of red in my eyes. I spun around, instantly spotting the school's public address speaker built into the wall just above the bust of the Goddess Celestia that looked down at us from above the door.

BLAM!!

My first shot missed, digging a hole in the wall near the speaker. My vision was getting rapidly worse, and I couldn't use my targeting spell. It didn't recognize the speaker as a target; there was nothing for it to lock onto.

BLAM!! BLAM!!

My second shot shattered Celestia's face. The third hit the speaker, which exploded in a shower of sparks. The sound of static softened but still remained; the pain didn't go away. There was at least one more speaker in here! I looked around, but my vision was swimming in red. I couldn't see anything.

The ringing in my ears drowned out nearly everything else. I could barely hear the explosions all around me as I lost my equilibrium and fell onto my side, my vision fading to black.

My vision cleared again almost instantly, leaving my ears softly ringing and a comparatively minor headache beating my brain. The others had charged in after me, and from the smoke and debris, SteelHooves had grenade-machinegunned the upper walls of the lobby until the static stopped.

I groaned and sat up slowly, wiping blood from my eyes.

"We have a new problem," Velvet Remedy informed me, her voice seeming strange and far away. I blinked at her, trying to clear my vision, then looked towards the entrance where she was pointing.

A shield spell had descended over the front of the door. Apparently, shooting up the lobby in Celestia's private school of magic triggered defenses.

* * *

We made it up to the third floor before finding that the stairwell to the next level had caved in, forcing us to cut through the classrooms to reach the stairwell on the opposite side. My plan to avoid detours was off to a bad start.

I pushed a door open, checking my E.F.S. for hostiles, then made my way into the classroom. The building was old, but mercifully free of the Pink Cloud, allowing us to proceed cautiously. We were operating under the assumption that the administrator's office on the top floor would have a terminal capable of shutting off the shields locking us inside. At least, that is what we assumed the large space at the top of the tower was meant to be based on a map which had decorated the lobby's back wall – a map which had lost large chunks under SteelHooves' grenade barrage.

Even in its state of decay, the room was elevated by touches of class that set it apart from the buildings outside of Canterlot – filigree in the walls and furniture, the tattered remains of rotting banners, the cracked marble tiles of a two-tone blue checkerboard floor.

I paused, staring at the globe tucked in the corner, the continents beginning to peel off its surface. Strangely, I had always considered Equestria to be flat. I looked around. The last lesson taught in this room was apparently astronomy, as the chalkboard still bore a diagram of (if I was reading it correctly) the single path on which the sun and the moon circled our world.

This was not something the science classes in Stable Two had covered. We had learned instead about mechanics and robotics, arcane science and spellcraft. I had sometimes pondered where the sun went when Celestia put it away, imagining it was hidden underneath us, possibly taking a nap. If this diagram was true, then Celestia was sending it to another part of the world to make it day someplace else. I wondered if that was the far away land where the zebras lived? Or maybe the place where dragons originally came from? Did that mean Nightmare Moon had locked them in eternal day, slowly roasting them alive? And… how messed up did things have to be now in order for the pegasi to occasionally see the sun and the moon in the sky at the same time?

"Unbelievable," Velvet Remedy intoned.

I turned to see that I was not the only pony distracted by the contents of the room. Velvet had trotted up the steps that ran along the rising rows of chairs on the side of the room opposite the blackboard. At the top, near another doorway, were several posters. Velvet was staring at one which featured a very small filly magically projecting a shield around herself and her family as an evil-looking zebra lowered a stick of dynamite towards her with a fishing pole.

"They were actually teaching children to use their shield spells to protect themselves from a megaspell attack!" Velvet Remedy stomped. From the poster, I gleaned that the spell was one of the first taught to any unicorn who had the capacity to learn it. "They might as well have been telling them to hide under their desks."

"Uh, Remedy, there ain't any desks in this room," Calamity pointed out.

Velvet Remedy swung around and saw the rows of chairs and the lectern; there was not a desk in sight. She sighed, "Not the point."

"Maybe Celestia just didn't want them to be scared?" I offered. I had to imagine that telling the children a lie that allowed them to believe there was something they could do was kinder than leaving them feeling helpless.

Or was my belief just born of corrupted kindness?

I grunted, hating Trixie.

Red lights started to pop up on my E.F.S. compass. Several of them, converging on the door next to Velvet Remedy.

"Velvet!" I hissed, motioning her towards me before pointing warningly at the door. Calamity, now wearing his battle saddle, flew into position covering the door. I whispered up a prayer to the Goddess Celestia that ended up becoming more of an apology for shooting Her in the face.

The door opened, and I felt myself go numb.

It was a small, Canterlot Ghoul-ized unicorn child, her schoolfilly uniform melted into her flesh. There were several more behind her, all colts and fillies, locked in the endless routine of going to and from their exams… until they spotted us and the air filled with a sound more horrifying than any I could imagine – a wordless sound of unadulterated and monstrous aggression from a chorus of achingly childlike voices.

No. Celestia have mercy.

I was frozen. My eyes locked on the monster children. I… I couldn't *do* this.

Calamity fired, the twin bullets from his battle saddle tearing into the filly's head, blasting most of her brains onto the remember-your-shield poster. Turning to the rest of us, he yelled, "What're y'all waitin' fer!?"

I knew they weren't really children. I knew they were, at best, feral animals and that they would kill us if we didn't fight or run. But my body refused to do either.

Calamity fired again. Next to me, Velvet cast her anesthetic spell at a young colt only to moan as the spell had no apparent effect. Even SteelHooves seemed to have faltered a moment, but now I heard the ports of his missile launcher open.

*Whoooooosh-**KRABOOOM**!!!*

Two rockets fired at an upward angle and exploded against the ceiling, bringing large chunks of it raining down on the creatures (children!) below, along with half a row of chairs from the classroom above us. I stumbled back as two colts and a filly were crushed under the collapsing ceiling, the little pony in my head sickly wondering if that had killed them or just inconvenienced them even after their lights went out on my E.F.S. compass.

"Littlepip," SteelHooves commanded, "Get us up there." Up… there? I felt like I was thinking through sludge.

"NOW!" he bellowed, snapping me out of my stupor. Calamity swooped past me, firing again as another Canterlot zombie-colt galloped through the open door and leapt over the rubble towards us. The twin shot hit the monster child in the side, knocking him back into the chairs. I wrapped my levitation field around the rest of us and levitated us up through the ceiling.

Behind me, I heard the sinister warping sound that signaled one of the fallen Cloud children was rising back up, filled with necromantic life.

⁂

I poked my head out of the classroom, looking both ways down the corridor. I kept expecting the zombie children to appear, but there were no hostile lights on my E.F.S. compass. I couldn't tell if they were still trying to get up to this level, or if they had ceased pursuing us the moment they could no longer see or hear us – literally out of sight, out of mind.

The hallway provided a new danger. The air was filled with a pink haze which grew thicker towards a ventilation grate in the ceiling. I could just make out the large metal fan behind the grate, warped and fused with the metal of the shaft itself. The dense patch didn't look particularly large, but it was slowly growing.

"SteelHooves," I instructed, closing the door, "We need you to scout ahead. Find the shortest path into another Cloudless section of the building."

The Steel Ranger Outcast nodded. I opened the door long enough for him to gallop through, then closed it again.

"Hey, Pip," Calamity said, his voice almost a whisper. "Ah'm pretty sure one o' the first Ministry buildin's was the Ministry o' Magic. Ah'm thinkin' we should pop in there an' grab ourselves some proper magical energy weapons, just in case we have t' deal with a bunch more Canterlot Ghouls."

"Here we go," I sighed, groaning inside and forcing myself not to facehoof.

"Well, magical energy guns are a might better against Canterlot Ghouls than what we're packin', SteelHooves aside," Calamity reasoned altogether too reasonably. "An' we shouldn't be relying on him t' bring down the house every time we face more o' the monsters."

"And for that matter," Velvet Remedy chimed in, "We really need to stop in the Ministry of Peace. It's right across the way, and we could definitely use the medical supplies. Especially if you end up fighting against those alicorns."

Of course we do.

I turned to them both. "Look, the more sightseeing we do, the longer and more dangerous this trip becomes. We're already taking longer than I wanted just getting out of the first building."

"All the more reason to get extra medical supplies while we can. You know the Ministry of Peace will have supplies somewhere."

I nodded. "Somewhere. That's the problem. You're not talking about a brief stop, either of you. You're talking about exploring those buildings."

Velvet Remedy nodded. "I know that, and I know it's dangerous. But I'm worried…"

"No, you just want to see Fluttershy's Ministry."

Velvet Remedy took a step back, feigning a wounded heart. My expression was unmoving. "Okay, fine. Yes I do. But I *am* also worried," she insisted. "About SteelHooves."

"SteelHooves?" Calamity echoed. "Why ya worried 'bout him fer? The guy can survive anything. Up to an' includin' the apocalypse."

Velvet Remedy rolled her eyes. "He's immortal, not indestructible. That armor might repair itself, but how do we know he's okay inside. The only things that heal ghouls are radiation and healing potions, and that suit of his is designed to self-administer. Now the last time he restocked his armor's medicine dispensary was Stable Twenty-Nine. And since then he's been shot through with anti-tank rounds, fallen a few hundred feet, and gone through whatever he was put through in Zebratown!"

"Look, Velvet, if SteelHooves was in trouble, he'd tell us," Calamity said.

"Would he?" Velvet questioned. I found myself caught, unable to decide which of my friends' flaws were at play here – Velvet Remedy's excessive worries or SteelHooves' stubborn stoicism?

I suspected this was the "other problem" that Velvet had claimed SteelHooves was being. I couldn't blame her for being concerned. Best case, she was a doctor who was being denied the ability to examine a patient. And the wasteland wasn't in the habit of serving up best cases very often. I was beginning to kick myself for having taken SteelHooves' durability for granted.

"Well, there was Gummy's," Calamity offered.

"But that was before he got shot," Velvet Remedy reminded the pegasus. "Afterwards, you only came back long enough to pick us up."

"Daymn," Calamity rubbed his brow under his hat. "Ah reckon ya might be onta somethin' there." Turning to me, he suggested, "Li'lpip, maybe ya ought t' run a diagnostic on his armor an' see just what state our friend is in. Fer all we know, he might be really torn up under all that steel."

I looked at the door, wishing SteelHooves was back already. "Okay, Ministry of Peace and Ministry of Magic. But only the fastest looks and only until we find what we need. Targeted missions. No sightseeing."

They both nodded.

Then Velvet Remedy added, "I was actually really hoping we could take a peek in the

Goddesses' castle too…"

I facehoofed. "No!"

* * *

I gasped, collapsing against the storage room shelving, the impact sending several boxes of cleaner toppling down onto my head as I fought for breath. My heart struggled in my chest.

Velvet Remedy slammed the door closed behind her, the last one in. She crashed into SteelHooves, bouncing between him and the workbench Calamity had curled up onto before falling to her knees. "I can't believe you've done that to yourselves before!" she gasped wretchedly.

Velvet began passing around healing potions.

"Under the police station was much worse," Calamity moaned, downing his potion. "Why d'ya think Ah saw blowin' up the boiler as a better alternative."

Velvet groaned shakily. "Forgiven." She floated her own potion to her lips and drank greedily.

I drank the potion Velvet had passed to me and closed my eyes, waiting for the healing effects to begin to mend my Cloud-ravaged body. Velvet passed a second round of potions and I could see that the stop in the Ministry of Peace would truly be necessary after all.

Weakly, I slid myself across the floor towards SteelHooves. "Lay down, soldier," I demanded, hurting too much to perform the social dance that friendship and civility required.

SteelHooves obeyed without question, accidentally knocking over a row of plungers with his armored tail. I pulled a tool from my barding and jacked my PipBuck into his armor, running a diagnostic. SteelHooves' displeasure at this invasion of privacy was radiating off of him, but he didn't move or speak.

The little pony in my head began to panic when my PipBuck started flashing medical alerts across my E.F.S. I fought to keep my little pony calm as I worked to strip away the alarms that were probably false – my PipBuck's medical assist spell was not calibrated towards ghouls, much less whatever physiology was normal for Canterlot Ghouls. I wished I had Velvet Remedy's understanding of medicine, although considering her reaction to ghouls that might not much help.

The one thing I could say for sure was that SteelHooves' armor was completely out of healing supplies, and apparently had been since partway through Zebratown. The stallion was keeping himself going on painkillers and combat drugs, most of which were also nearly depleted. What had he been planning to do when those ran out?

Hell, one of his legs was broken in multiple places. The armor was holding it together like a cast.

"Not okay," I told him sternly, feeling like I was wearing Velvet Remedy's horseshoes. He said nothing. "If you're in trouble like this, you need to tell us!"

"I'll be fine," he finally said. But I noticed he wouldn't look at me when he said it.

The damn thing was, he probably would be so long as he didn't get himself killed permanently before he could re-supply his armor. Between now and then, however, was a whole world of pain. The painkillers were handling a lot of it right now, but not all of it, and they would be gone soon.

This felt like self-punishment. Maybe for what happened on Bucklyn Bridge. Or maybe because of bad memories, wounds and regrets that coming here and to Zebratown had made fresh again.

I could point out that when the painkillers stopped, the pain might hamper him, putting us all at risk. That was the sort of argument I knew he would listen to and accept. But it was also cold and selfish. SteelHooves was our friend, and he deserved better than that. I needed something to say that would show him we cared and yet would still be persuasive in his ears.

I looked to Velvet Remedy for help, only to be reminded of our argument about the Fluttershy Orb. Velvet Remedy was escaping, SteelHooves was abusing himself… I looked up at Calamity and wondered if he was doing any better. Calamity seemed fine… but then, so had SteelHooves until I took a deeper look.

At least Xenith was okay, right? No… Xenith never really seemed okay. After what she had been through, I would be surprised if there was an "okay" in her world that even vaguely resembled the one in our own. Her freak-out at being bitten was still fresh in my mind. But at least she was getting better, I thought, rather than worse. Although… at the time we had left, Xenith had still not admitted to Xephyr that she was her mother. Was that just Xenith being a zebra? Or was it a warning sign, something else I had been missing?

SteelHooves pushed himself back up, disconnecting his armor from my PipBuck. "I should go."

"Go where?"

"Out," he replied. "To find the next room that is clear of the Cloud."

* * *

Velvet Remedy tossed up her shield, the shimmering screen of magic filling the hallway just in time for the three baby dragons to slam into it. The little, wingless creatures growled and clawed at the shield, their eyes glowing, their faces distorted in rage.

"Oh, aren't they cute?" Velvet cooed. She got a resounding *NO* from the rest of us.

"More trouble at our four," Calamity warned. I spun around.

From the other end of the hall, several Canterlot colts and fillies emerged from the stairwell. The lead filly had another Cloud-ruined baby dragon on her back.

I stared at the filly, my eyes drawn to…

"Littlepip, what are you starting at?"

In black horror, I hissed, "Look at her cutie mark!" The schoolfilly's tattered uniform gave a clear view of the blob of dark pink that emblazoned the Cloud child's flank.

I reeled at the implications. The child had gotten her cutie mark after the megaspell, after she had "died". That the Cloud had transformed the poor little filly into an undying monster was horrific enough, but somehow the idea that it had warped and corrupted her to the point that the Pink Cloud had stolen from her what should have made her special… and replaced that with *itself*… was somehow so much crueler, so much more abhorrent.

The child horror lowered her head, her horn glowing a violent pink. Thick wisps of Pink Cloud snaked out of the air around her glowing horn, swirling as it filled the corridor. The filly was actually conjuring Pink Cloud!

The baby dragon jumped from her back and began charging at us, its little claws tearing at the hallway carpeting.

The twin-shot from Calamity's battle saddle echoed through the hallway; the baby dragon's body ragdolled against the wall. A moment later, the tendrils of pink began to reach us. Immediately, my head swam, my headache spiking. I backpedaled, trying to get away, only to hit Velvet Remedy's shield. The three baby dragons behind us gave little roars of anticipation and violent desire.

"What…" Calamity coughed, "Is with… the rest of you?" The pegasus dropped to the ground, unable to keep flying as the Pink Cloud began to eat at his insides. He fired blindly into the pink. "They're… Not. Really children!"

I could hear the Cloud children galloping down the hall towards us. All I could see was pink and black, the edges of my vision beginning to go dark. My E.F.S. compass was showing nothing but a mass of blurry red. Every breath seemed to shrivel my lungs, making me fight harder to get half the air I could the breath before.

Velvet Remedy collapsed beside me, her shield going down. One of the baby monsters leapt at me, claws scratching at my barding and digging wet scratches in my flesh, its teeth sinking into my mane, trying to tear at the back of my neck.

SteelHooves opened fire on the hallway. I curled up as I was pelted with concussive waves and shrapnel from the close-quarters explosions. The blasts left my ears ringing, my sense of direction and balance shot to hell. But they also thinned the Cloud. My gut was twisting, my insides felt like they had begun to rot, but my headache cleared just enough that I could focus. I floated out Little Macintosh, aiming it at the small monster gnawing on my back, and fired.

I felt the creature drop from my back. The poor thing which should have been allowed to grow up, to be a dragon.

Velvet Remedy was curled into a ball, crying. The two other baby monsters were trying to eat her. Her body was a tapestry of shallow, bleeding scratches. I fired twice more, getting them off of her, and stumbled to my hooves. Somehow, dreadfully, it was easier for me to shoot these creatures than the monsters who took the form of children. As if the fact they had never grown old enough to talk or think like people made it more okay to treat them as rabid animals.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was flashing medical warnings. Even thinned, the Pink Cloud was killing me. I needed to get out before my internal organs started shutting down. Wrapping Velvet in my magic, I galloped as fast as my legs and lungs would let me… a staggering trot… trying to get out of the pink.

Behind me, Calamity fired once more, then pivoted and followed, stumbling as he attempted to run. The air filled with that noisome, grating sound as the eyes of the baby dragon Calamity had shot began to glow and it began to growl.

"Get to the top," our Applejack's Ranger called back to us. "I'll hold them here." None shall pass.

* * *

"We're down to the last of our healing potions," Velvet Remedy warned softly, tears in her eyes. I groaned as I drank the potion she floated over to me. We hadn't even gotten to Ministry Walk yet! "And I still haven't had the chance to restock SteelHooves' armor."

I watched as the slashes of red that covered Velvet closed gently, mending themselves before my eyes, leaving her looking unmarred yet still covered in her own blood. The mare swayed despondently then curled up next to Calamity on the large bed in the center of the room.

The large, circular room had no windows, but both the fireplace and the chute provided means for the Pink Cloud to enter the room. Fortunately, a magical ventilation spell had prevented the Cloud from pooling here, leaving the air only the lightest shade of pink. Survivable levels of pink, so long as none of us fell asleep in here.

The administrator's room had been lovely once, a solemn room of violets and blues with a mural of clouds drifting along the wall and a delicate ornateness to every feature and piece of furniture. Ghosts of that beauty remained in the greasy rot of the carpet, bed and tapestries. A golden, scroll-shaped stand leaned against one wall next to crumbling bookshelves filled with decayed books and the residue of dissolved scrolls. Next to the center bed was another golden stand, this one holding a terminal, its screen glowing softly.

The door into this room had been one of the hardest locks I had ever encountered. I expected no less difficulty from the terminal.

"It just isn't right," Velvet Remedy choked, leaning against Calamity. "All those children… those little baby dragons…" Calamity wrapped a wing around her as she began to sob again. "They didn't deserve this! It… it's so… *unfair!*"

It was worse than unfair. This was evil.

I felt a bubbling rage simmering in my beating heart. But there was nopony to be angry at. I couldn't be mad at the victims, and the zebras (and possibly ponies) who created and deployed the megaspell were long dead. No, I was furious with the *Pink Cloud itself!* How dare it!

I began to hack, trying to focus, not wanting to take out my frustrations on the terminal lest I make a mistake and get locked out.

"Littlepip…" Velvet said softly, "If… if the megaspell is still working here… still pouring out this poison…" Her eyes closed, her trembling voice finding determined steel. "We need to stop it."

I nodded.

The password was "apologies".

* * *

The Apple Orb

My host was checking his watch. The little hoof pointed to seven, the big one just a few minutes past the hour. It was either late morning, or less than an hour from midnight. I had no way of knowing – the hallway was a cold, grey metal with no windows – yet it felt like night.

A soft chime from behind drew my host's attention. He turned as the elevator doors opened, party music playing over the speaker in the room. The elevator seemed empty.

My host stepped away, watching cautiously. The elevator doors closed, cutting off the sound of music. I could barely hear the soft hum as the elevator began to descend.

My host looked to his left. Empty hallway, no doors, ending with the heavy steel door of a vault. He looked to his right. A magical field of blue light shimmered in front of an iron gate. The room beyond was filled with humming maneframes.

"I apologize for running late," an exotic voice said from the nothingness, sounding slightly muffled. First the head of the zebra appeared as she pulled her hood back, then the rest of her. "I did not mean to make you wait."

I felt my host press his lips together. "That's all right, Zecora. But you'll have to hurry. Security will cycle any minute now. When it does, we've arranged for the shield to drop, but it will only be down for four minutes. You'll have to get in, get the data, and get out." I saw my head turn away as I fished a key out of the pocket of my security uniform. "This will get you through the gate. You know which system you are looking for, right?

Zecora nodded. A sad look formed on her face. "I ask if this is worth the cost? The lives of ponies will be lost."

I felt a frown etch across my host's muzzle. "We have to be willing to make sacrifices if we are going to end this war. Your success here will get you the Caesar's trust, and that will allow you to get close to him."

My host stepped back. "But, if it helps, I'm sure they will arrange for the weapons factories in those schematics to have minimal staff when the zebras hit them." My host's frown turned into a grimace. "Unfortunately, we've had a small complication."

Zecora raised an eyebrow.

"They've installed some sort of new gemstone detector. Something from the Ministry of Image, of all places. It is designed to detect zebra talismans like your cloak, and it's not part of the normal security system, so we can't shut it down without raising alarms. You'll have to remove your cloak before going in."

"I will not need it once in there, so I will leave it in your care." Zecora slipped out of her cloak, now wearing only a satchel. She looked strangely naked without the jewelry I had seen her wearing before.

The shield of blue energy suddenly went down.

My host sucked in a breath. "Quickly. Strike me down. Hard!"

Zecora spun and bucked at my host. One hoof caught him squarely in the chest, cracking at least one rib. The other sank hard into the soft flesh of his neck.

Zecora's eyes widen as I collapsed, choking, fighting for air. She had clearly not intended to land a possibly fatal blow.

My host waved her on, coughing and fighting to remain conscious. Zecora galloped down the hall. I heard her unlock the gate and pull it open, but my vision was blurring.

I sat there, fighting harder and harder, trying to breathe, air struggling to get through my throat and into my chest.

I heard the chime behind me. The door opened and an apple-green stallion in tuxedo barding stepped out, looking around. Applesnack.

The moment he saw me, his eyes widened. Then narrowed, taking in the discarded zebra cloak nearby. “Dammit! I knew something felt wrong!” He looked up, observing the open gate and the disabled magical shield. “Hold on, buck! I’ll get…”

Applesnack froze, his voice silencing abruptly, as Zecora rounded the maneframes, heading back.

“YOU!”

Applesnack stepped into a battle stance as Zecora stopped short.

“You!!” Applesnack called out, fury in his voice.

“Applesnack…?” Zecora said, failing to rhyme, her eyes growing wider.

“She trusted you! She let you into our house! And you betrayed her!” Applesnack was striding slowly forward. “I opened my heart to you because she wanted me to. I even began to trust you, to like you… a *zebra!* How could I have been. So. *Stupid!”*

“Ap… Apple…” my host wheezed, holding up a hoof. “Don’t…” But there was almost no sound to my voice. I, we strugged to get up, but our hooves wouldn’t work. I realized we really *were* dying.

“She thought you were a friend. You broke her heart!” Applesnack was roaring. I suddenly knew. This was what was hurting him. I remembered SteelHooves’ denial when I told him the truth about Zecora, and the painful resignation that seemed to follow.

I would prefer she had killed these monsters with cold-blooded calculation, SteelHooves had told Calamity, regarding my rampage in Arbu. It wasn’t the killing he thought was bad. It was the blind rage.

“And now, you come back, *tonight of all nights,* to hurt her again!??”

Zecora crouched down submissively. “You have caught me, I do not fight,” she intoned. “I am your prisoner tonight.”

Applesnack stooped, shaking. Then screamed, bellowing, “No! Zecora, that is not how you say *died. Resisting. Arrest!”*

No. Oh no, SteelHooves. Don’t do this.

He charged, turning and bucking at Zecora. She didn’t try to dodge. At least, not the first time. She did the second. And the third. And the fourth.

My host flailed as darkness began to seep into the edges of his vision. The fight for breath was getting harder, and he was losing. His whole body felt weak and distant. I didn’t feel the hum of the elevator at all. But we heard the chime. As the doors slid open, an oddly familiar song floated into the hallway.

“…How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?
When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding
And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won’t survive?”

It was the song that had played in SteelHooves shack the morning I first really met him. The song he became strangely lost to.

My host struggled again, trying to get up, trying to make any part of his body work now. We weren’t getting any air anymore.

Down the hall, I saw Zecora strike out, trying to defend herself. Applesnack ducked under the kick and brought up one of his own, striking her underneath and sending her body flying against the wall. Zecora hit the wall with a meaty smack, leaving a splash of blood as she fell to the floor.

From within the elevator came a horribly familiar voice. “Nuts n’ shrews. Ah know the boy is plannin’ on proposin’ tonight, but if we’re missin’ our song cuz Sergeant SteelHooves has become Sergeant *Cold Hooves…”*

Oh no! Oh nonononononono NO!

Don’t come out here Applejack! Don’t see this! It will hurt you if you see this.

We had been trying to repair our relationship, SteelHooves had told me, *ever since the night she had seen the darkness in me.* Not learned about. Seen.

Applejack, wearing a little black dress that was clearly a Rarity original, stepped out of the elevator. She looked to her right, seeing an empty hall ending in a vault door. She looked left.

Her eyes widened, pupils dilating to pinpoints as she saw Applesnack, bloodied, his torso heaving with each breath, standing over the very bloody corpse of Zecora.

* * *

* * *

“There’s a secret passage from the basement of the examination building to the royal treasury?” SteelHooves asked in disbelief as we galloped towards the Celestian Monument, our weapons and most of our supplies floating in tow behind me.

“Ayep! Don’t make sense t’ me neither. Seems that would be the sort of place ya wouldn’t want secret ways inta,” Calamity responded, gliding along beside us. “But that’s what the map on that terminal said.

I was still reeling from the knowledge of whose office I had set hoof in, whose terminal I had managed to break into. Velvet and Calamity had laid down in Her bed!

After Her sister Luna had taken the throne… after Littlehorn… She had spent a lot more time at Her school than in the castle.

As we reached the monument, we slowed our pace. Most of the alicorns were on the far side of Ministry Walk, but my E.F.S. was picking up hostiles close enough to worry about, even in the ruddy, fading light of dusk. We needed stealth now.

The Celestian Monument was magnificent even after centuries of decay had taken bites out of its structure, leaving patches of framework bare. I stopped a moment to stare in awe, then bowed before it, sending up a prayer to the Goddess.

I heard the sound of static. It was growing steadily louder.

A sprite-bot was approaching from the front side of the monument, its speakers broadcasting white noise and necromantic death. My vision fuzzed, my head beginning to throb for what seemed the infinity-ith time that evening. We were just on the edge of the effect now and we started stepping back to keep from being engulfed.

I was useless against the ghouls and zombies created by the Pink Cloud, and nearly as helpless against alicorns, but this was a threat that I alone was equipped to handle. I was the only one with a ranged weapon that was *quiet.*

I floated out the Zebra Rifle, peering down its sights, tracking the approaching robot by its “friendly” light on my E.F.S. compass. Waiting for it to float into sight…

Pffft. Pffft. Pffft.

The sprite-bot dropped to the ground, internal circuitry burning, its broadcast dying with a pop of ozone. We trotted past it, ignoring the scrap.

Well, most of us did. Calamity picked it up and offered it to SteelHooves, remembering the ranger's armor used scrap metal to repair itself.

The outside grounds of Celestia's school had been blissfully vacant. Anypony outside had fled to the safety of the buildings when the Pink Cloud came. Not that the buildings had proven sufficiently safe.

As we rounded one of the mighty wings of the Celestian Monument, we saw that Ministry Walk had not faired so well. There were skeletons scattered all about the field, sticking out of the ground like black weeds. Ponies had filled the park when the Pink Cloud consumed it.

…a stallion whose bow tie and collar had become permanent parts of his neck…

…the twisted framework of a baby carriage with the skeleton of the baby pegasus pony welded into it, the infant's mother laying half inside the cobblestones nearby…

…a mare who had been sitting on a park bench in a most peculiar fashion, her skeleton now melted into the bench itself, holding her to that pose forever…

…two ponies fused together in an eternal embrace, their skulls tilted up upwards in the direction that pink horror had descended upon them, snuffing out the twin flames of love and life…

"This is too much," Velvet Remedy moaned. Then she gasped in horror, stopping dead, staring ahead of us.

The Ministry of Peace. The Canterlot Hub of Fluttershy's Ministry had been built into a grove of magically grown trees. Two hundred years ago, it would have been a heartwarming vision of natural beauty. But the Pink Cloud had murdered the trees, turning them into twisted, black terrors, the whole building looking like a haunted house.

Small objects littered the cobblestones and lifeless planters that circled the Ministry – scissors, ashtrays, metal picture frames – all objects sucked out of the rooms whose windows had shattered. Parts of a terminal lay smashed on the steps just outside the front doors. A ceramic butterfly had shattered into six pieces scattered across a row of dead hedges.

As we crept forward, Velvet Remedy hesitated. "I… I don't think I want to see anymore. I don't want to know what this poisoned place has done to Fluttershy."

* * *

Velvet Remedy paused to look at a corner diorama featuring Fluttershy sitting in a forested field, surrounded by gentle animals. I could guess she was struggling against the urge to shatter the display and steal the foal-sized Fluttershy for herself.

"Are you okay?"

"I… I just can't take her away from all her forest friends," Velvet whined softly.

The Ministry of Peace had suffered severe internal damage when the trees that formed most of its outer walls had twisted in their unnatural death throes. Pink Cloud had seeped into all but the most interior rooms. To our further dismay, the Canterlot Hub seemed to be less a place of healing and medical research than a public front and administrative center for the other MoP hubs. We were coming up empty-hooved in our search for medicine.

The only upside is that nothing in the Ministry of Peace had attacked us yet. Everything in this place was dead.

I approached a set of double-doors and nudged it open. Velvet Remedy, looking over my shoulder, whinnied in dismay.

A haze of deep pink filled the massive room which had once been an auditorium. Rows of rotting seats descended towards a dilapidated stage beneath the last dangling threads of Cloud-eaten curtains. The walls, formed from even more trees, were blackened and dead.

Velvet Remedy inexplicably pushed past me and galloped into the poisoned room.

"Velvet! Whatcha doin', girl? Get yerself outta there!"

Velvet paid us no attention, charging up to the stage and jumping onto it. I saw her waver as she landed, the Pink Cloud beginning to get to her. I shouted for her to come back. Beside me, Pyrelight cried out, calling to her beloved Velvet.

"What in tarnation does she think she's doin'?" Calamity demanded.

Velvet stumbled, turning and standing before the podium. She put a hoof on it, and it broke apart at her touch. I could hear her sob. The auditorium still had great acoustics.

Seeing her standing on that stage, wearing her yellow medical boxes, I suddenly realized this wasn't just any auditorium. That wasn't just any stage.

"um… h-hello?" Velvet Remedy said meekly, reciting from memory. "Can I have your attention, please? If you don't mind?"

Oh Goddesses!

"Hold on, Li'lpip. Ah'm gonna grab 'er!"

"Thank you," Velvet was saying. "Now…um… I know everypony is really, really busy. So I'll try not to take too much of your time."

"Calamity, wait!" I said, holding up a hoof. Pyrelight fluttered at the edge of the pink, hooting in agitation.

"Wait?" he spun to me fiercely. "She's gone plum off her rocker! She'll die in there if we wait."

I focused, wrapping Velvet Remedy in my magic. "I'll pull her out… just… I think maybe she needs to do this?" She was risking her life to do this, and I couldn't tell if she was on the road to catharsis or catatonia.

"Needs to do what?" Calamity demanded.

Pyrelight didn't wait. The balefire phoenix soared into the poison, flying to Velvet Remedy.

Below us, Velvet Remedy continued, her inflection perfectly matching Fluttershy's. "Princess Luna has given us… that is… she's allowed us to… We have a new project." Velvet paused, looking out over the crowd that only existed in her mind, as Pyrelight landed by her forehooves and rubbed against her, nudging her to move.

"This is bad," SteelHooves told me.

Velvet cringed slightly, "Please… it's okay. I know we're all overworked, and everypony has *so* much to do already… and you're all doing just wonderful." She gave a most beautiful smile.

"Oh what in the hay?" Calamity moaned.

Pyrelight began to cough. I extended my magic around her too, feeling increasingly anxious. Did she need this? Would she ever forgive me if I pulled her out, denied her this? Did it matter?

"But… this is really important. I've been talking with Princess Luna, and…" Velvet fell to her knees, coughing, her voice getting weaker as she struggled to breathe. "I really… really want to do this project. I'm behind it…" She coughed again. "… completely, and I really hope you will be too. This horrible, terrible war has gone on far, far too long and hurt so many people."

I could hear the sadness and hurt in Velvet's weakened voice. Sweet, merciful Celestia, I could see her tears!

"Enough of this!" Calamity growled. "Li'lpip, get her out of there now!"

I nodded, blinking back tears of my own. "From your lips to Celestia's ears," I whimpered as I levitated Velvet Remedy and pulled my friend from that gas chamber.

⁂

Velvet Remedy was barely in a condition to move, much less walk, even after I had fed her our last healing potion. We left her in the care of Pyrelight and SteelHooves.

"Mind tellin' me what the hell all that was about?" Calamity asked angrily as he flew along above the maze of office cubicles I was wading through.

"The Fluttershy Orb," I told him. I heard a crunch and felt a sharp pain in my left forehoof. Looking down, I saw that I had stepped on the skeletal remains of some small creature. I stopped, leaning against a cubical wall as I telekinetically pulled a thorn-shaped bit of broken bone from my hoof, which beaded with blood. There were other little skeletons all over this floor.

"That auditorium… that was the room where Fluttershy was talking to her Ministry ponies in the orb's memory. Velvet Remedy was reciting it… or reliving it… or something."

"An' that struck ya as somethin' we oughta let her keep doin'?" Calamity snapped.

"I… I don't know. Velvet is a performer. I don't think that was… I hope that was just her doing a performance. Her one chance to be on Fluttershy's stage. But…"

I turned to my pegasus friend, the first friend I had ever really had. "Fluttershy's Ministry created the megaspells, Calamity," I admitted to him.

"WHOA!" Calamity stopped in mid-air, hovering. "Say *what* now?"

"They were originally intended as mass healing spells. She never meant for them to be used as weapons of death."

Calamity groaned. "Velvet…"

"She doesn't know yet. But sooner or later she's going to find out. And when that happens, do you think it will be any easier if we had denied her the chance to do… whatever she was doing?"

"Fuck!" Calamity bucked one of the cubicle walls, punching his hoof through it.

We moved on, the offices quiet except for the background music of Calamity rummaging through desks and filing cabinets. The air in here was clear, if musty and old. Yet it felt like the Pink Cloud was all around us, eating at my friends, its corrosion seeping even into our friendships.

We made our way through the floor without talking again, past the cubicles and the smaller offices, until we reached a curving yellow hallway. On the inner curve was a simple wooden door, the frame around it covered in little birdhouses. Along the bottom of the door were several smaller doors, as if designed for little creatures to move in and out as they pleased.

Along the outer curve were two pairs of stately, arched double doors made of polished mahogany. These too had a little animal door built into them. The far set was open, but all I could see of the room was part of the wall. The curve of the hall prevented me from seeing the far end, but I didn't need to. Just beyond the open doors there was a sign mounted on the hallway ceiling, the glass plate reading "Elevators" still backlit by a slightly flickering light.

I checked my E.F.S. for any signs of hostility, but the whole floor was dead. Nudging Calamity, I suggested, "Let's finish this up. I want to get out of here. You take that door," I motioned towards the small, peculiar inner door. "I'll take these."

Calamity nickered unhappily, but flew ahead to the smaller door. I was wagering that an office designed to allow small animals was the less likely to have dangerous defenses. Not that I was expecting anything threatening from either room. The Ministry of Peace had been entirely, even eerily, peaceful.

I watched as Calamity opened the door to the inner office. It wasn't even locked. I then shifted to the closest set of mahogany double doors. Inside was a meeting room, dominated by a rich table crafted exquisitely from the same mahogany as the doors. Chairs were overturned, papers and folders were scattered. The opposite wall was dominated by a huge picture window that stared out over the pink-tainted Ministry Walk.

The room held a single skeleton: that of a mare whose body dangled from the window, a forehoof melded into the glass. There were imperfections radiating away from her hoof, cracks in the window which had fused back together before the pressure outside could grow enough to blow the window in. A once-beautiful saddle-purse hung rotting from her bones, the bottom having torn away, dumping its contents on the floor.

Was that… Fluttershy? My heart sank, a knot forming in my throat. I stepped closer, eyes fixed on the skeleton, only to run into the table. Somehow, part of me was sure that it was Fluttershy. That she had… no, wait. I felt a flood of relief as I realized it wasn't the kind yellow pegasus after all. It couldn't be! No wingbones, a horn… this was a unicorn. Probably a secretary or a nurse, possibly a caretaker of Fluttershy's animals while she was away. But not Fluttershy herself.

As I walked around the table to get a closer look, I spied the far wall where a chalkboard hung between two monitors. The meeting room had been designed for multi-media presentations. Amongst the strange diagrams, the chalkboard bore four words written in bold yellow chalk, save that the first letter of each word was pink.

Communally
Assured
Reciprocal
Existence

I felt weak. "Oh… oh poor Fluttershy…" I stumbled and sat in a chair. The chair promptly fell apart, dumping me onto the floor. Blinking, I found myself looking between the table's legs at the hindhooves of the dangling skeleton and the collection of rubbish that had fallen from her purse.

Amongst the decayed garbage lay a statuette, still pristine, of a yellow pegasus pony surrounded by birds and butterflies, a small family of chipmunks and a white rabbit. She was smiling at them sweetly from behind the curtain of her pink mane, a look of gentle caring in her eyes.

I got up, walking closer until I could see…

Be Pleasant.

The final of the Ministry Mare statuettes. I now had a full set. Only I wasn't going to keep this one. I knew a unicorn who needed her more than I did. Besides, wouldn't it be wrong for *corrupted kindness* to be carrying around the statuette of the Bearer of the Element of Kindness? Wouldn't I be… dishonoring her somehow?

So it was with every intention of giving the Fluttershy statuette to Velvet Remedy that I wrapped it in my magic… and everything changed. I felt a surge of magic, much like with the others, but this time it was accompanied by something more. Something greater.

As I lifted the Fluttershy statuette before me, I knew that I was going to keep her. Not out of selfishness. Not because it was something *I* wanted or felt I deserved.

The statuettes wanted to be together. The Ministry Mares needed to be together. They were meant to be. Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Twilight Sparkle, Rarity, Applejack. They were stronger when they were together, better. Separating them had been the worst thing anypony could have done to them. I knew that; and now that I had brought them together, I knew I couldn't separate them again.

* * *

Calamity dumped out the medical supplies he had found. "Ah found Fluttershy's personal office," he told Velvet Remedy. "An' no, before ya ask, she wasn't there. But she left us all this…"

Velvet Remedy's smile touched her eyes, making them sparkle. It was as if Fluttershy herself had left the supplies we would need just for us.

"Cabinet weren't even locked," Calamity commented.

Velvet began sorting through the medicine. Calamity had simply grabbed everything. I recognized super restoration potions and healing potions, enough to get us through three Canterlots with some to spare. Painkillers too. Most of the rest, however, were beyond my ken.

"Veterinary medicine," Velvet Remedy explained, dividing the pills for animals from the drugs for ponies. Then she took a few of the former pile, "For Pyrelight, just in case."

Pyrelight gave an exaggerated hacking sound and then shot Velvet a challenging look.

"Oh you'll take your medicine if I give it to you," Velvet shot back, eyes narrowing but smiling nonetheless. "I have enough problem patients with theses *ponies.*"

"Fluttershy's office was more like an office fer a doctor than the head o' a whole branch o' the Equestrian government," Calamity mused. "There was even an eye chart on the wall, but with nuts." He placed a hoof over one of his eyes, mimicking, "Acorn, almond, walnut, cashew, peanut, another acorn…"

Velvet wrapped the healing potions in her magic and divided them amongst us. "Keep these with you. In a place like this, it makes no sense for only one pony to be carrying all the medical supplies." She then scooped the rest into her medical boxes, save for a selection that she had set aside for SteelHooves.

Turning to the outcast ranger, Velvet cautioned, "Now I'm giving you what I can, including about half the painkillers. But Fluttershy didn't stock up on combat drugs, so I'm afraid you'll have to do without Buck and Dash and whatever else you've been pumping into your body." She tisked. "And we still need to find you a radiation pit as soon as we can. Before you go tussling with anything too nasty."

SteelHooves nickered but said nothing, letting Velvet Remedy access the medical dispensary in his armor.

Calamity pulled out a few cans and boxes of food he had scavenged from a wall-mounted vender. I felt a rumble in my gut and realized I was starving. Two-hundred-year-old snack cakes didn't sound too appetizing, but what Calamity put before us was all we had. We had left all our provisions with Xenith and the starving zebras of Glyphmark.

"Y'all will be thrilled t' know that Fluttershy an' her Ministry were 'parently all vegetarians too," Calamity quipped.

Velvet Remedy shot him a look. "Calamity! I can't believe that even after Arbu you would still even think of *eating* meat!" She pointed a hoof at me. "Even Littlepip has learned better."

"Gee, thanks," I muttered.

Calamity shrugged. "Spoken like somepony who ain't never tasted bacon." Damn. I had to admit I was going to miss bacon. But after unwittingly eating another pony, I didn't think I could stomach it.

Velvet neighed, eyes narrowing as she stepped towards the pegasus, bringing them almost muzzle-to-muzzle. "You know, sometimes I think the reason you didn't have as much trouble with those cannibals as we did is because you like meat and you don't see eating ponies as very far removed from eating radhog."

Calamity whinnied back, eyes narrowing in return. "An' sometimes Ah think the reason ya Stable folk get all uppity 'bout eatin' meat is cuz you can't see it bein' more'n a step away from eatin' ponies."

So much for eating. I watched helplessly as the two lovers glared at each other.

"Ponies are supposed to be vegetarians. Eating meat is a perversion. Every time you do it, you let the wasteland win a little."

"Nonsense. It's survival," Calamity countered. "Hell, even eatin' ponies is a victimless crime. After all, they're dead. They don't care. It's only when ponyfolk start killin' other ponies, like the bastards in Arbu did, that Ah reckon they've done anything wrong."

More glowering. The air between them was so tense I was waiting for something to explode, giving equal odds to them shooting each other or kissing.

Finally, Velvet Remedy suggested in a low voice, "Let's say we back away and just go to the next building before one of us says something he will regret."

"Ah reckon y'all will say somethin' you'll regret first."

"On the contrary…"

"ENOUGH!" I shouted, unable to take the tension. I magically scooped up the

uneaten food and dumped it into my saddlebags. “Seriously, both of you!” I stomped.

“To the next building. Calamity, you’re with me in front; Velvet, you’re in the back.” I grumped, floating up all our weapons and supplies, “Goddesses, I can’t take you two anywhere.”

Pyrelight landed on SteelHooves’ battle saddle. I swear that bird was laughing.

* * *

We were halfway between the Ministry of Peace and the Ministry of Arcane Sciences when the alicorn spotted us. She was standing on the roof of Twilight’s Ministry, staring down into the Walk below. At first, I had mistaken her for a carved statue; the whole Ministry building had a vaguely alicorn motif – the knight on the Ministry Walk chessboard. The dark blue stone was probably meant to honor Luna. The wall that encompassed the base of the building was of smooth marble with silver inlays and embedded diamonds in the form of the constellations – the sort of display that you would expect from a tastelessly ostentatious observatory or a really bad dress. Even with the red light on my E.F.S., I was legitimately surprised when what I thought was part of the architecture launched itself into the air and swooped down towards us, her magical shield flickering to life around her.

KRAPOWW!!!

I collapsed, clutching my ringing ears, as the shot from Spitfire’s Thunder pierced the alicorn’s shield and tore through her neck, splattering her blood against the inside of her shield behind her. The shield flickered out as the alicorn plowed into the ground at our hooves.

Velvet Remedy moved to me, dipping her head to nip my barding, helping me back to my hooves. As soon as I was standing, she backed away, saying something, but I couldn’t hear her over the ringing in my ears. Comprehending my blank expression, she pointed a hoof up the field of Ministry Walk.

I twisted, and my E.F.S. compass filled with red lights. The shot had brought a lot of attention. Alicorns were beginning to look this way, a few of them already taking flight.

SteelHooves galloped past us, ignoring the Ministry buildings completely, firing missiles and rapid-fire grenades at the clusters of alicorns. The field of Ministry Walk erupted in dirt, smoke and flame.

KRAPOWW!!!

KRAPOWW!!!

Calamity fired Spitfire’s Thunder as quickly as the massive weapon would allow, taking aim at the shielded alicorns while SteelHooves dashed through the thick pink pool, tearing apart those too slow to react with his patented level of massive overkill.

One of the alicorns on the far side of the pink water reared up. “I’ll bring the head of the pegasus to Nightseer myself!” She launched into the air, her shield sparkling to life around her.

“Yuf whaff naw?” Calamity asked indignantly, his muzzle still biting down on Spitfire’s Thunder.

KRAPOWW!!! The shot passed through the heart of the flash of light where the alicorn had been an eyeblink before. At the same instant, the dark purple monster appeared in another flash right behind Calamity.

I charged, Velvet Remedy galloping beside me as I fired Little Macintosh, the bullets sparking as they ricocheted off the alicorn's shield. The alicorn's horn glowed. I slid to a stop, gasping as I watched blood from the crashed alicorn corpse beside Calamity float up, wrapped in the purple alicorn's magic, and begin to take shape.

Calamity spun around, but the alicorn was too close. The barrel of Spitfire's Thunder struck the shield, knocking it out of Calamity's teeth. Velvet Remedy skidded to a stop, pressing her glowing horn against the alicorn's shield as she cast her anesthetic spell. The ball of light manifesting just inside the shield and striking the alicorn.

The alicorn collapsed inside her shield, her body paralyzed but her magic still unhindered. The blood from the dead alicorn next to us solidified into a ruddy blade.

The bloodsword flew at Calamity. He reared back, the blade slicing past him, leaving a shallow cut below his neck that wept blood.

I could hear the whoosh of SteelHooves' rockets and the continuous thunder of his grenade machine-gun. From the sound, he had switched to high-explosive grenades in an effort to beat down an alicorn's shield.

The bloodsword circled around, diving for Calamity's face. My pegasus friend clamped down on the bit of his battle saddle, firing. The sword burst as he shot it out of the air.

"Y'all run ahead," Calamity shouted. "Ah've got this one." He kicked up Spitfire's Thunder and snatched the muzzle bit in his mouth.

The paralyzed alicorn looked up at him from inside her shield, eyes widening.

KRAPOWW!!!

Velvet Remedy urged me towards the Ministry of Arcane Sciences then began galloping towards it herself. I quickly followed, Calamity covering our backs and SteelHooves… well, SteelHooves seemed to have forgotten the rest of us completely. He was just being the Mighty Alicorn Hunter, steel-armored scourge of monsters in the Equestrian Wasteland.

Calamity spun around as two more shielded alicorns dove out of the darkening pink sky. He lifted Spitfire's Thunder, taking aim.

<click>

"Ahf craph!" Calamity's eyes widened. Deciding there was no time to reload, the pegasus turned tail, flying after us.

The two alicorns swooped over the pool, their shields skimming the pink water. They swerved broadly around SteelHooves, giving him a wide berth. SteelHooves tried to turn towards them but he was far enough into Ministry Walk's reflective pool that the watery pink sludge was impeding his movement. The alicorns left him behind, chasing after Calamity.

I heard multiple cracks of thunder and the air lit up with bright flashes as several alicorns fired bolts of lightning into the reflective pool. SteelHooves let out a deep-throated scream as arcs of electricity lashed over his armor, then collapsed into the water, vanishing beneath it.

"Dammit!" I changed course, dropping our supplies behind me and running towards the water, dodging as I tried to make myself a difficult target. I searched for SteelHooves with my E.F.S., but there was no light. Either he was dead again, or the super-saturated pink water was impairing my PipBuck's targeting spell.

A wing of alicorns took flight, soaring over the violently sundered corpses of several of their sisters. A fourth cast another lightning bolt, the flash momentarily blinding. I could feel heat and smell ozone as the bolt ripped through the air less than a yard from my body.

I reached the edge of the pool and jumped, wrapping myself in magic and telekinetically flying over the pool, swerving as much as I could while keeping my head down, looking for any trace of our fallen metal paladin. If I could just spot him, I could wrap him in a levitation field and…

My head exploded, my horn feeling like it had cracked apart! Even as I screamed, I knew there was a broadcaster hidden in the water…

I dropped, all four hooves splashing down into the thick pink sludge before I caught myself. My head was splitting open from the effort. My horn felt like it was trying to screw itself into my head; I was certain that the necromantic energies were somehow focusing on the source of my magic. I had to find the broadcaster and get rid of it! No! I had to go up! Get away!

I somehow noticed (Awareness!) that the alicorns were holding back. This was the same spot the others had veered around before. I had thought they were avoiding SteelHooves, but even as I screamed in agony, I realized (Be Smart!) that they had been avoiding the broadcaster.

I could feel a new agony, a terrible burning in my hooves and legs. My magic imploded and I dropped into the viscous pink pool with a splash. Now my whole body was burning!

I clamped my muzzle shut, thrashing involuntarily from the pain. If I drank it, even a little, I was surely dead. I forced myself to focus past all the pain. I no longer wanted to get myself away from the pink pool or the broadcaster; I could no longer comprehend moving. Now, in utter desperation, I tried to get *them* away from *me.* With all the concentration I could manage, I wrapped the entire pool in my magic and floated the water, the skeletons, everything that wasn't me *up* as high and as fast as I could.

The super-saturated pink water of the reflective pool flew into the air. I looked up, gasping as the pain in my horn and head receded. The burning faded, lingering most heavily around my right foreleg. I stood, shaking violently, flinging the pink water off my body until I almost felt dry. Then I dared to open my eyes.

The alicorns had flown back away from me and the suddenly flying pool of water overhead. They stared and murmured to each other in voices I could best describe as "concerned".

I looked up. In the last rays of twilight, I could see hundreds of small coins and bottle caps glistening along the bottom of the water. I could see skeletons floating in it, many of them fused together. I spotted SteelHooves, his metal-shod tail dangling down out of the liquid pink.

I gingerly separated him from the liquid mass above me. I looked the way I had come. Calamity, Velvet Remedy and Pyrelight were all staring with expressions trapped between screaming and cheering. I tried to gallop towards them, taking SteelHooves with me, but searing agony shot up my right foreleg and I fell onto my face.

My body had been through too much. It didn't want to cooperate anymore. But even through the dull pounding in my head, I was able to focus enough to wrap myself in magic. The pain in my head spiked, the throbbing jumping an order of magnitude, but I slowly pushed myself back towards the edge of the pool and my friends, SteelHooves in tow, releasing more and more of the Cloud-saturated water as I went. The liquid pink poured down like a curtain behind me.

I felt myself starting to pass out. The effort of self-levitation was too taxing, and my body was screaming from abuse. Suddenly, I felt warm forelegs wrap around me. Calamity had flown out underneath the floating lake of pink and was taking me to safety. He soared over the edge of the pool just as my spell collapsed completely. I heard SteelHooves drop onto the field with a metallic thump. Velvet turned and galloped towards him, her horn glowing.

Calamity didn't stop, flying towards the entrance of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. "Hold on, Pip!" he encouraged as he flew through the front doors…

…and was gone. I felt a moment of freefall. I think I even felt myself hit the floor. Then blackness.

The Butterfly Orb

The yellow carpeted floor raced under my feet. I could feel my nerves on edge. I found myself trapped in a small, utterly alien body as it darted between the hooves of scrambling, panicking ponies. A constant rumbling thunder filled the air, mingling with cries and shouts from the ponies I was scampering through as I raced down the aisles between a city of cubicles. A magenta pony spilled a shower of papers in front of me as she fled the room. One of the sheets slapped me in the face as I barreled through them.

I made it through the offices and found myself charging down a huge, curving hallway, my little heart pounding in my chest. I heard a mare screaming from beyond a set of mahogany double doors. The voice was filled with rage and tears.

"HOW COULD THEY?! HOW COULD THEY DO THIS?!?"

I dashed for the little door built into the bottom of the larger one, a little door just my size.

"TH-THEY'VE RUINED EVERYTHING! THEY'VE K-K-KILLED EVERYONE!"

The meeting room looked like it had been hit by a tornado. And it really had, a yellow and pink tornado in the form of Fluttershy. I burst into the room just in time to see her hurl a terminal through the glass of the seemingly gigantic picture window, shattering a large hole in it. The sound of impossible thunder amplified. Outside the window, I could see the sky shimmering and rippling with explosions as zebra missiles pounded against the Princesses' shield. Each impact brought a flash of fiery light splashing against the shield, the surface rippling outward like water around a dropped rock.

Fluttershy stood on the table, shaking, stomping, her face streamed with tears and contorted in rage. She looked around for something else to throw, something else to break.

"I… I GAVE THEM LIFE! AND… AND THEY… And they…"

I knew this room. I had just been here.

The window had already begun to repair itself, the shattered hole growing smaller as the spiderweb of cracks thinned and shrunk. Ministry magic. The building was alive. It healed.

I leapt up onto a chair, and from there onto the table, rushing to Fluttershy's side.

"They… I…" The poor pegasus sobbed horribly, trembling on the verge of collapse.

"I did this! This is all MY fault!"

I reached Fluttershy, wrapping myself around a forehoof, hugging her tight, trying to comfort her.

"Oh!" She looked down at me and I felt her tears splash onto my forehead. "Oh… oh Angel, what have I done? Everypony… all the helpless little critters… *they're all going to die. And it's ALL. MY. FAULT!"*

Fluttershy toppled onto the table, burying her face, wailing.

Beyond her, I saw that fateful writing:

Communally
Assured
Reciprocal
Existence

I held Fluttershy, stroking her anxiously, trying to help, feeling terrible. She didn't deserve this. This *wasn't* her fault.

Outside, the pounding thunder and violent lightshow continued.

With a bang, the second set of mahogany doors at the front of the meeting room slammed open as a white unicorn burst into the room. Her gorgeous purple mane and tail looked frazzled, and a beautiful saddle-purse hung next to the three diamonds of her cutie mark.

"Fluttershy!" Rarity called out, looking around and spotting the crumpled, weeping pegasus. "Oh… oh goodness."

Rarity trotted up hurriedly. "Fluttershy, darling, we have to go!" She prodded at the sobbing, broken pegasus. "We only have half an hour before they're supposed to seal up Stable One. We need to get inside!"

I couldn't tell her that it was probably already too late.

"Leave m-me," Fluttershy whimpered. "You g-g-go, Rarity. Save yourself. I… I d-deserve to die!"

"Rubbish!" Rarity put her forehooves under Fluttershy's head, lifting her tear-streaked face. "You deserve to live. Probably more than most of us. I won't let you die here."

"R-rare?"

A tear dripped down one of Rarity's cheeks. "I love you, Fluttershy. And I am not going to let you stay." Rarity smiled softly but her voice brooked no argument. "Now pull yourself up and come with me, or I'll drag you all the way with my teeth."

I looked between Fluttershy and Rarity, one paw still petting the yellow pegasus gently.

FHWOOOOMP!

All three of us turned towards the window. It had almost repaired itself, the hole now the size of a baseball. Outside, the shield continued to fluctuate under the massive, fiery barrage.

Then we saw it. A thick pink mist rolling over the city. It consumed block after block, flooding down alleys and boiling over the tops of buildings. Rarity let out a gasp as the thick pink mist splashed against the towering Ministry of Image, breaking around it as the same wave of pink rolled over the Ministry of Arcane Technology, drowning it completely. I blinked, and the Ministries on the opposite end of Ministry Walk were gone.

Then the trees were gone. The pink cloud washed over the grassy park, the reflecting pool and all the panicked, terrified ponies below.

The wall of pink rushed at us. The park was gone.

Rarity gasped again, this time spotting the hole in the window. She threw herself towards it.

The trees were gone.

Rarity slammed a forehoof over the hole.

The wall of pink hit the Ministry of Peace. There was nothing outside the window anymore. The cracks that remained in the window began to warp and melt, fusing together. Rarity groaned in pain, but she held her hoof firm against the hole, not letting the Cloud get inside.

"R-rare?"

Rarity's eyes opened wide. She gazed at the window, whispering with a low tone of comprehension. "This… is necromantic."

Rarity turned to Fluttershy, who was staring at the window in horror. "Forget Stable One, Fluttershy. I'm getting you to safety!" With that, she focused, her horn glowing. A flash of light burst around Fluttershy and the yellow pegasus was gone.

I felt the worry and anger etch across my face. I scampered up to Rarity and kicked at her.

She looked down at me, her horn glowing again as she opened her saddle-purse. "Don't worry, Angel. I've sent her someplace safe."

I kicked at her impatiently.

"Ow. Okay, I have sent her to Zecora's old hut in the Everfree Forest. Well, at least I got her very close to it. The zebras are attacking pony population centers. There are no ponies in that forest, so it is the only place I am sure they will not attack." She smiled as she drew out a memory orb. "Don't worry, Angel. I will send you to her. But first, I need to leave a message for Twilight…"

Rarity stared down at me. "Twilight, darling, I've sent Fluttershy away. And if I can, I'll be going too. I don't want you teleporting around town, looking for… ugh! Oh… oh this is bad…" Rarity faltered. I could see even this small contact with the Pink Cloud was beginning to kill her.

"…Don't look for us. Don't stay in Canterlot. But… but there is… oooooough!" Rarity thudded against the window weakly. Her hoof would have dropped away, but it couldn't anymore. It had become part of the glass. "Listen, Twilight. In my desk, in my office, there is a very special Book. It's hidden in a secret compartment. You may have to tear the desk apart to get it, but… AAAAGH! …but don't worry. I won't mind. Twilight, it's a spell book. And…" Rarity began to cough violently.

"…and I believe it has a spell that can be used to… to defeat this necromancy! You… you must get that Book…"

Rarity leaned against the glass, her hoof supporting her weight now. Still, she floated the memory orb close to me. I realized suddenly why she had been talking to me like I was Twilight Sparkle. My memory was going to be the message.

Her horn glowed. “Don’t worry, Angel. This won’t hurt. And as soon as I’m done, I’ll send you to Flu…”

* * *

I groaned.

My whole body hated me for still being alive. My headache had ratcheted up to the point where it was hard to think straight. My right foreleg itched horribly beneath my PipBuck. Everything else just hurt.

Too much physical trauma in too short a period of time. My body was crying out for me to stop. I’d lost count of how many times I’d been shot, beaten, poisoned. Wounds that would normally take weeks or months to heal. Instead I drowned myself in potions of magical healing, letting them mend everything and then throwing myself back into the fray. Pain had become as much a companion for me as my friends.

But these things, the broadcasters and the Pink Cloud, were so much worse. They tore me apart in ways a bullet never could, attacking everywhere at once, attacking my magic, attacking my brain. Even with potions of healing and restoration, I couldn’t help but feel that deep and permanent damage was being done. I wasn’t going to live to a ripe old age. One day everything I had been putting my body through would catch up to me and I would die young.

Part of me wanted to want to quit while I was ahead. But every part of me knew that I could never quit. Quitting was surrender. I couldn’t even rest, as much as I knew I should. Every day I rested was a day that others whom I could have saved would die. If I had rested even an extra hour, the young zebra would have been slain by those bloodwings. If I had rested an hour less, I would have been able to save his friends as well.

Pain I could handle, as long as I was alive and still able to make a difference. I wondered if this was how SteelHooves felt.

I’d saved him. He hadn’t been moving, but I knew he couldn’t be dead. The lightning may have rendered him unconscious or knocked his armor’s spell matrix offline. Either way, if I hadn’t gotten to him, the alicorns would have. The broadcaster wouldn’t have saved him, although it definitely bought him time.

Thank the Goddesses I had at least managed to levitate the liquid pink sludge away before I had inhaled any of it. Thank Celestia and Luna that I’d drunk healing potions minutes earlier and didn’t fall into that pool with open wounds from those Canterlot dragon hatchlings.

I couldn’t tell if I had been supremely lucky or supremely unlucky.

And, now that I thought of it, I’d come out of it with a new weapon against the alicorns. Granted, one that was indiscriminately lethal. But it had to be possible to use the broadcasters to my advantage.

But first I needed to…

…where the hell was I?

"Calamity? Velvet Remedy?" I was alone.

"SteelHooves?"

"…Pyrelight?" Completely alone.

I was laying on a soft, cushioned bed. I tried to sit up, and a thunderclap went off in my pounding head, knocking me back down and leaving tears in my eyes. I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, not remembering turning it off, and scanned the medical warnings. I needed to drink a super restoration potion, possibly several. And painkillers. I needed painkillers.

I didn't have any. I didn't have *anything!* No weapons. No supplies. I vaguely remembered dropping our weapons and supply packs when I went chasing after SteelHooves. I groaned at the thought of Little Macintosh laying abandoned out in that field. I felt like I'd lost a friend.

Hopefully, Velvet Remedy grabbed everything before following us. But doing so would have been taxing for her limited telekinesis. And I couldn't imagine her prioritizing weapons when she had SteelHooves to care for.

But I wasn't wearing my utility barding either. And I definitely didn't strip down before my unintentional swim. I felt truly naked as I realized I didn't even have my hacking tools.

Looking around, I was in a library. No, an athenaeum. And a big one, bigger even than Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum in Tenpony Tower. I remembered the recording that Homage had played for me, Rarity talking to Twilight:

"I've just heard my Ministry is about to purge the Ponyville Library of ideologically incompatible books, and I knew right away that you'd want to keep them for yourself… I know the Ministry of Magic on Ministry Walk has a much bigger library, but we can't get away with diverting these wagons to Canterlot, now can we?"

If only I could spare the time to just sit and read.

"Ah, you're awake." The voice startled me. It was urbane, the voice of a gentlestallion. I quickly looked around, wincing as the pain in my head amplified from the sudden movement, blurring my vision. "Good morning, ma'am."

Morning? Oh Goddesses, I'd been asleep all night? And nopony had found me? This was unspeakably bad.

"Who are you?" I asked the mysterious stranger. "Where am I?"

"Wordsworth at your service, ma'am. You are in Twilight Sparkle's Athenaeum, ma'am."

I blinked away tears, turning my head more slowly as I began to mentally hone in on the source of the voice. There he was… or it, rather. A mechanical owl. A much fancier version of the one I'd seen following the merchant who had set up in the remains of Trixie's Cottage. I remembered fighting owls similar to this one in the Ministry of Morale hub in Manehattan too. But this one looked more sophisticated. And more lovingly crafted, down to the bronze filigree of feathers.

"Who… what are you?" At least this mechanical owl didn't seem hostile.

"Wordsworth, ma'am. Twilight Sparkle's junior, junior, junior assistant."

"How did I get here?"

"Well, ma'am," the owl said, sounding embarrassed, "When a mare and a stallion love each other, or have made certain binding contracts…"

I interrupted quickly, "Into this room, I mean?" The pony in the back of my head was blinking. Certain binding contracts? But then, this was Canterlot, home of royalty and nobility.

"You were teleported here, ma'am. Security protocols. The Ministry is under lockdown. All visitors and staff are teleported to their proper areas, and intruders are remanded to secure containment areas."

Cells, he meant. The itching under my PipBuck was driving me crazy.

Further questions revealed that the lockdown had been running constantly since the "environmental catastrophe" over two hundred years ago. Furthermore, all the teleportation zones were inside the Ministry building, but Wordsworth couldn't tell me where any of the others had been sent. Neither could the owl give a satisfactory explanation of how I had rated teleportation into Twilight Sparkle's private library. I got the sense that the security system wasn't functioning quite the way it was supposed to. It had degraded under centuries of continuous operation. I was probably lucky I hadn't been teleported into a bookshelf or a wall.

"And what about my clothing?"

"All foreign objects bearing trace amounts of toxins were teleported to sanitation." I really hoped that didn't mean incineration!

"I would like them back, please."

"Certainly, ma'am," Wordsworth responded pleasantly. "Sanitation has been completed. They will be returned to the wardrobe immediately."

Another fear shot through me. If this magical security system stripped me of my armor, then would it try to strip SteelHooves' armor off of him? Or would it recognize something melded to him as integral? That was, assuming Velvet Remedy was able to get him to the safety of the Ministry building. My mind conjured the alarming image of Velvet running into the Ministry, levitating SteelHooves behind her, only to be teleported away, leaving SteelHooves helpless outside on the doorstep.

If he was inside, and still alive (for those definitions of alive that include Canterlot Ghouls), then he was separated like the rest of us. My friends could be anywhere in the building. Again, I remembered that they had all night to try to find me. The fact they hadn't most likely meant they were in bad shape.

I moaned and tried to sit up again. My E.F.S. was still flashing health alerts at me. I lifted my PipBuck to check the automap, wishing all my friends wore PipBucks so I could just locate their tags. Of course, that's exactly the problem that got me into this whole mess a month and a half ago, wasn't it?

I looked at my foreleg and stopped breathing.

I wasn't *wearing* my PipBuck anymore. Where the metal device should stop and my flesh should start, they didn't. Instead, they melded seamlessly into one another. I felt sick looking at it.

I had been so casual to dismiss the possible danger before, but now that it had actually happened, I felt a sense of violation and loss that I couldn't explain. I just… I wasn't me anymore.

I dropped back onto the bed, curled up and cried.

"Wordsworth," I whimpered several minutes later as I tried to fight back the hollow feeling in my heart. "I need medical supplies. Any painkiller, healing and restoration potions you can give me."

"You would not prefer to use the autonomous healing booth, ma'am?"

The what now? "Okay, yes… where is the healing booth?"

* * *

Never again.

I felt better, physically, than I had in weeks. Psychologically, I was shaken to the point of collapse. The healing "booth" was a solid metal tube barely bigger than a pony. Stepping into it had been like stepping into my own coffin.

The air had been stifling even before the door slid closed behind me, plunging me into darkness. I had never felt claustrophobic before (if anything, I was prone to sudden onsets of agoraphobia). But in that metal casket, in the absolute darkness, with the *sounds* that horrible thing made…

And then I had started to feel the magical energies probing me, washing over me like some sort of slimy, alien massage from an invisible and horrible creature!

Never, ever again. Even though my body felt better, I knew I would have nightmares for weeks. I could already anticipate waking in cold sweat, feeling the dream terror of being trapped endlessly in that "autonomous healing station".

It had worked perfectly as it was supposed to, and yet manticores couldn't drag me back into one if I was at the edge of death. I shuddered to imagine the horror one of those things could inflict if it wasn't functioning properly, if it malfunctioned or suffered degradation from the Cloud.

I felt myself shiver.

The walls were covered in a soft, velvety cloth – burgundy in color with sparkling accents – that gave the hallway a rich, luxurious feel. Oil paintings hung on the walls. I passed a spot where a large oval of darker cloth betrayed the removal of what had probably been a portrait. Ahead of me, the hallway ended at the door marked "spell testing". Somepony had scrawled the words *"Spell in a Box"* on the door in what looked like dried blood. From the end of the "x", the blood streaked down to meet a dark stain on the floor.

"Not a good sign," I muttered to myself. I was appropriately creeped out.

As I approached, I could faintly hear the hissing sound coming from behind it, like a hundred dying snakes. I stopped, psyching myself up, taking deep breaths, and opening the door from a distance with my magic. Through it, I could see another door at the far end of a laboratory. One more deep breath, and I broke into a run.

I galloped through the doorway and into the lab, my ears filling with the sound of static. The headache that the healing station had rid me of returned with a passion, accompanied by a familiar pressure in my horn. I didn't have a firearm. No way to take out the speaker. I just had to get through the lab and out of its range before it could kill me.

Blood began to tint my vision as I reached the opposite door. It was locked.

I telekinetically fumbled at the lock, the pain in my horn escalating, the deadly effect of the broadcaster tearing at my brain. I had spent nearly an hour in the healing station, and for the first time since leaving Tenpony, I had actually felt healthy. I had been allowed to enjoy that sensation for less than forty minutes.

I unlocked the door and pushed it open, stepping out of the lab and outside of the speaker's kill zone. I panted, leaning against a railing, blinking away blood and tears. Then I looked down into a grand hall lined with sweeping staircases. Below me was a fountain similar to the one in Homage's foyer. Only the statue here was of two identical unicorn mares frolicking. On the walls to each side were oil paintings, including a royal portrait of a smiling, green-coated unicorn mare with a darker green mane. Hanging opposite was what appeared to be the same mare, only with the colors of her coat and mane swapped.

"Velvet?" I called out. "Calamity? Anypony home?" My voice echoed in the stately and empty corridor.

At the end of the grand hall, in the crux of multiple stairwells that spread out like butterfly wings, was a very important-looking, high-arched set of double doors flanked by unicorn busts. I was unsurprised that they were locked.

I was very surprised when the moment I started to pick the locks two magical-energy turrets dropped down and started shooting at me. I was immediately thankful that my armored utility barding had been returned as I spun and dove over the railing of the nearest stairwell, catching myself with levitation as soon as I was behind cover.

I supposed I should consider myself lucky that my barding hadn't been submerged in the pink pool long enough to fuse to my body. And that my hacking and repair tools had likewise not been fused together or otherwise warped into uselessness. Having my PipBuck melted onto my arm was a brutal enough blow, and I had never wanted to take it off.

Yeah, that would have made my relationship with Homage really difficult, my little pony teased. I shushed her, annoyed, and turned my focus to unlocking the door from safety.

It was proving a tough lock, but I had faced one tougher already today. I saw a purple flash from above me and heard a crackle – this door had magical defenses beyond just the turrets. If I had been trying this with my trusty screwdriver and a bobby pin, I would be in a bad state.

Click. Yes!

I eased myself to the floor, turning my focus to the fountain. The glow of my magic washed over the pooled water. I lifted the water into the air using it to shield me overhead as I galloped back up the stairs. The magical energy turrets spotted me and started to fire, each shot evaporating part of my shield in a puff of steam. By the time I got through the door, there was barely enough left to fill a wastebasket.

I was so thankful there weren't more turrets waiting inside. Instead, I found myself in what I quickly deduced was the head researchers' office. Bookshelves, filing cabinets, tapestries, arcane spellwork tables. The room was laid out symmetrically around a carpet with an intricate star pattern of alternating colors. Two rather impressive desks faced each other, with oil paintings of the same green ponies hung on the walls behind them – not portraits this time, but full paintings which allowed me to see their matching cutie marks: spiraling magical sparks intertwined with each other. On each desk sat a terminal next to a glass placard with a name sealed inside, made out of sparkling glitter.

Gestalt and Mosaic.

Trotting around the desks, I spotted a weapon display case and several ammo boxes. Inside the display case was a magical plasma rifle and a multi-gem magical energy shotgun. The latter reminded me of Gawd's gun. It took me less than a minute to make them mine. I was tempted to run back upstairs and shoot the damn death-speaker. I wasn't very good with magical energy weapons, but I was sure I could take out a stationary target at close range.

Moving to Mosaic's terminal, I drew out my tools and began to hack into it. Mercifully, the pink-saturated water that bound my PipBuck to me did not seem to impair its functioning. Stable-Tec didn't fool around when they made PipBucks; the devices had a durability somewhere between SteelHooves and a soul jar.

⁂

"Velvet?" I asked as I pushed open the door I had just unlocked. The chamber inside was pitch black, and my voice echoed off walls both far and strange.

"Littlepip?" a voice called back from the darkness, sounding weak and relieved.

A light flared, illuminating Velvet Remedy's horn, then her eyes, mane and tail. Her charcoal coat seemed to blend into the void around her.

"Over here." I lit up my own horn, guiding her to me. She got up shakily, and trotted quickly towards me.

"Thank the Goddesses," she whispered as she reached me, nuzzling my face. "I… I was trapped in here for so long. Alone. Trapped." She'd said that twice. I didn't need explanation. My lovely songbird friend had once again found herself caged and alone. She was trembling.

"It's okay, Velvet. I'm… I'm sorry it took so long to find you."

"What happened? Where am I? Is Calamity okay? Is Pyrelight? What happened to SteelHooves? I had him right with me…"

I lifted a hoof to her muzzle, quieting the flood of questions. Then wrapped her in an embrace. I wasn't surprised by how she folded into it. I was surprised how quickly she regained her composure, pushing me away.

"Thank you, Littlepip, but the others are who are important now."

I nodded and began to fill her in. Thanks to the terminals of Mosaic and Gestalt, I had a pretty good idea of where everypony was now. Velvet Remedy had been trapped in one of the megaspell casting chambers that filled this entire floor. SteelHooves was somewhere in the Arcane Techologies research labs two floors below us. Calamity was somewhere in the basement which included prisoner containment, Ministry Security, high-security storage and (incongruously) the Ministry's kitchens. Pyrelight had never been registered as entering the building. Either she never got inside or the security system had a phoenix-sized hole.

Something had apparently gone seriously wrong in the basement. All the security systems had been rerouted to the terminals of Mosaic and Gestalt and communication with the basement had been severed.

The unicorn twins had not only been the head researchers for the Ministry of Arcane Sciences in this hub but for the Ministry as a whole. It appeared they were regularly left in command of the Canterlot hub, particularly while Twilight Sparkle was away at the Ministry hub in Manehattan. As best I could tell, they weren't actually in the Ministry when the lockdown started, but I was able to lift it by issuing simultaneous commands from both their terminals. Thank you again, telekinesis.

As I finished telling Velvet Remedy what I knew, she looked at me curiously. "Why didn't you have Wordsworth send you all of our equipment?"

I blinked. Then facehoofed. "Because I am not a clever pony." We had to find sanitation as well. Dammit, this just got worse and worse.

"Well, why don't we run up and ask him to before heading down farther?"

Oh. Yeah, that would be easier, wouldn't it?

* * *

I dropped everything I was floating except the two magical weapons and dashed into the lab, the static doom of several broadcasters ripping apart my head and driving spikes into my horn. It was a repeat of three floors above, only this time I had a magical shotgun. I spun, looking around for speakers, radios of skeletons with broadcasters attached to their civilian-model PipBucks.

FVZASSHT!

I fired at the PipBuck-clad foreleg of a unicorn skeleton. The short-range multi-blast of magical energy turned bone and broadcaster to slag.

FVZASSHT! FVZASSHT!

One shot missed the table radio completely, hitting a chemistry set three tables over, causing an explosion of glass and colored steam. The second slagged the radio, killing its lethal output.

Still: static. One more. My vision was red, I could feel blood trickling down my ears. Grenades were going off inside my head. I spotted the second broadcaster and lifted the multi-gem magical shotgun, pulling the trigger.

Nothing. The damn thing was recharging.

In a panic, I fled to the far side of the lab. I pressed myself into the corner, breathing a sigh of relief as the vices crushing my horn and skull vanished. That last yard of space was outside the danger zone. I floated up the magical energy rifle, took careful aim, and fired. And continued to fire, reloading twice, until I finally hit the little fucker.

"Safe now!" I called out. Velvet Remedy entered the lab and began to search it as I slumped in the corner and waited for the headache to die down more. She was wearing her medical boxes again, and started gathering supplies from the identical yellow medical boxes on one wall.

"So…" I gasped. "What exactly were you trying to do down in that auditorium?"

Velvet nickered. "I already got this lecture from Calamity." She floated bottles and vials out of a medical box, pausing as she lifted out a multi-tubed injector. "Rage? Why would this be down here. Rage is a zebra-made combat drug."

"Not a lecture, Velvet. I just… I want to understand. You scared the hell out of us."

"Calamity said that too. Although louder."

I hadn't been present for that particular argument. Calamity had flown ahead of me, rushing back to Velvet and SteelHooves after raiding Fluttershy's office. They had been given plenty of time to argue too. I had been lost in thought, contemplating the Ministry Mares, and had managed to get lost in the cubicles.

"Please, Velvet," I sighed, fighting to keep my voice gentle even with the throbbing of my head. I floated out another painkiller syringe and gave myself the shot. Almost immediately, the throbbing dulled to an ignorable level. I worried that I was seriously risking addiction to painkiller.

As if to drive home the worry, Velvet Remedy floated a tin of Mint-als out of the last medicine cabinet, opened it, flipped it upside down so the pills fell to the floor like heavy snow, and then began stomping them to powder.

She turn to me with an exasperated stare. "Fluttershy was right there, Littlepip. She had stood right at that spot, saying those very words. Right on that stage, Fluttershy had tried to stop the war, stop the bloodshed and horror that ended up ruining the entire country…" Her voice hitched. "…the entire *world!*"

She turned away from me. "You wouldn't understand."

"Alpha Technologies" the sign claimed. The heavy metal door slid back, revealing the most secure laboratories in the Ministry of Arcane Sciences.

"SteelHooves!"

Velvet Remedy and I dashed inside. Our friend was laying on a circular platform, surrounded by a magical shield. At our entrance, he stood up. I think I even detected a whinny of relief.

Velvet stopped just outside the shield, looking it over before asking him if he was okay. Clearly, the alicorns' attack had knocked him unconscious after all, but he had regained it hours ago. Five-point-three hours ago, according to SteelHooves who had nothing better to do than watch the timekeeper on his visor's E.F.S. count away. Even if his weapons could disable the shields, the explosions would have torn him apart in that confined space. Not even SteelHooves could survive dismemberment.

I found the terminal which controlled the magical field and began to trick my way through the security. Soon, I was looking at the control system for the lab's several layers of security, as well as a series of project reports.

I turned off the field, smiling to SteelHooves. "Welcome back!" Velvet Remedy gave him a hug that I knew he couldn't feel but somehow made him look uncomfortable anyway.

"I've collected some more medicine for your dispensary," she chimed, and immediately he looked less uncomfortable. I chuckled and directed my attention to the terminal screen, perusing the reports, starting with those which had been subdivided into a category called "Ghost".

Report 347

Mosaic (or was it Gestalt?) passed down a new project for Alpha today. Apparently, after over three years of pure failure from the mares up in *spellcrafting, the Ministry Mare has given up on the Ministry's effort to reverse-engineer zebra invisibility magic into spell form. Given our success with the StealthBuck, she's passed the project onto us, requesting that we design a sustainable magical device capable of indefinite invisibility: our own version of the zebra's stealth cloak.*

This new project comes right on top of losing a member of the Alpha Herd; although from what I understand, that may make things easier on us. Officially, all I know is that Beaker has been suspended without pay. Unofficially, word had leaked down that Beaker is under investigation for accepting "contributions" from somepony within the Ministry of Technology in exchange for hampering the development of magical energy weapons. Sounds to me like there's a pony or two in the building next door who is more concerned with Ironshod Firearm's market dominance than what's best for all the good ponies of Equestria.

Report 397

Another day, another pointless daily report that nopony ever reads.

The shipment of drugs finally arrived from the Ministry of Morale, three weeks late and accompanied by two of their pink suitcase ponies who insisted on monitoring how the restricted drugs were used. I hear there were some hard words between one of the magic twins and the Morale officials. (You'd think, after all the work we put in on talismans for their ridiculous balloons, they'd be more cooperative!) End result: even though the shipment is actually in the building, we are going to have to wait at least three days while administration pushes through new paperwork before the drugs will be cleared and we can finally start the next round of tests on our prototype Steel Ranger medical dispenser.

Continued efforts in improving the design and duration of StealthBucks seems to have hit a wall. The MG StealthBuck II is the most advanced design we have managed, taking advantage of the same recharging magical properties we have introduced into some of the newer lines of magical energy weapons and possessing four times the duration of our original design. However, recharging takes hours, and the duration still falls far short of our goal marks.

Gestalt (or was it Mosaic?) visited Alpha today to review our progress. After explaining our difficulties, she suggested we pursue a new avenue of experimentation: a stealth suit which takes advantage of a multiple StealthBuck array. While one StealthBuck was providing invisibility, the others could be recharging.

I've passed her idea on to the rest of the Alpha Herd, and we've started some preliminary sketches. This looks promising.

Report 444

Today was a good day to be in Alpha Labs. Or, more precisely, to not be two floors above. Somehow, the Mare of the Ministry of Peace got wind of the sorts of megaspell ritual chambers the ponies in spellcrafting have been designing. For such a soft-spoken and pleasant old girl, she's apparently a right terror when she gets angry. And there aren't enough bits in the royal treasury to make it worth facing an angry Ministry Mare.

After spending a month calibrating the new array, the Ghostmare Suit is ready for its first live test. As well as the test turrets, I've brought Wonder into the office today. I figure, if the Ghostmare Suit can get by my cat, we have a winner.

Twinkle and Daybreak have been particularly snippy with each other again today for no apparent reason. I suspect those two bucks are having an affair. If so, I hope they keep it quiet. Personally, I think they would make a cute couple. But we have fraternization rules for a reason, and the last thing I want is to lose one of them because the magic twins decide to put them on separate floors.

Report 445

Wonder was a big hit in the office. Every member of Alpha Herd gathered around and utterly spoiled her with attention. A few are even insisting that I bring her back again. I'll run it past the magic twins. Maybe I can spin having a lab cat as being good for morale.

Sadly, the Ghostmare Suit was not as impressive. Not only did the suit fail to pass the "Wonder test" but we discovered that the array was draining power from all the StealthBucks while just one of them was running. The latter is technical design problem, I'm sure of it. The former is more worrying. We ran three members of the Herd through the test gauntlet with just StealthBucks alone, and Wonder didn't catch any of them. Something in the suit, or maybe something in the array, is weakening the invisibility spell somehow.

Fortunately, we have time to try to fix this before the next review. Nobody is paying attention to us down here with that big mess upstairs. Apparently, Fluttershy went to Twilight Sparkle, and now the magic twins are cleaning house. I don't get the politics involved here, but I do get that two dozen unicorns have been fired already, and this is just the first day. Another dozen have actually quit, taking up an offer from the Ministry of Peace.

I have even heard rumors that they might be planning to dismantle some of the chambers, or redesign them for purely defensive spells like the Ministry of Peace is demanding. But I don't put any stock in that gossip. Equestria isn't going to disarm itself in the middle of a war. Especially not after the zebras successfully tested a megaspell of their own last week.

Report 489

Thanks to Wonder, we have finally gotten insight into the one of the issues plaguing the Ghostmare Suit Project. Apparently, the magic of *zebra stealth cloaks is also designed to mitigate sound and smell. During the development of the StealthBuck, we had noticed the difference in the muffling effect between the zebra's artifacts and our own devices. We had written this off as it an acceptable loss, particularly since the cloaks' original sound dampening effect was relatively minor to begin with.*

We had not, however, noticed the olfactory effect. This was apparently of greater concern to the zebras, possibly on account of the plethora of dangerous wildlife rumored to exist in their homeland. (Further proof that the zebras are innately crazy. Could you imagine living in Equestria if it was full of roaming monsters?)

While the original StealthBuck still retains at least a fraction of this effect, the MG StealthBuck II does not. Or, more precisely, does not after its first use. For reasons still a mystery to us, this element of the spell refuses to function after the StealthBuck II recharges.

Twinkle let something slip today about he and Daybreak getting a cat. I made a seemingly off-hoofed comment about cats having a tendency to reveal things that should be kept secret. I hope he got the hint.

Report 512

The Ghostmare Suit Project suffered another setback today. I am amazed at how something so simple in concept can be so resistant to proper execution. I spent all last month solving the mutual-depletion problem only to find that the new array can't pass the stress tests. The Ghostmare Suit isn't worth anything if it can't sustain invisibility after a one-yard fall.

A few of the other researchers in the Alpha Herd have begun referring to this as Project Frustration. With other projects beginning to pile up, I'm going to have to take most of my ponies off of this one, down-prioritizing it until things look a little more promising.

Fortunately, Gestalt and Mosaic are out of Canterlot today, having an on-site meeting with Twilight Sparkle at a new facility out in Splendid Valley. (Honestly, I breathe a little easier when they aren't around. I personally find the magic twins a little creepy, particularly the way they finish each other's sentences. Doesn't anypony else get the shivers when they do that? It's as if Mosaic and Gestalt always know exactly what the other sister is thinking – like they are not so much twins as one mare stuck in two bodies.)

Okay, no more reading Ghosts, Goblins and Ghoulish Figures on my breaktime.

Report 550

Twilight Sparkle paid a surprise visit to the Alpha Lab today. To my dismay, she asked for an update on the Ghostmare Suit Project. She had apparently hoped we were much further along, and had wanted to bring in Rarity, the Mare of the Ministry of Image (what the hell?), for a

> *consultation on the suit's aesthetic design. Seriously, the suit's supposed to be invisible. Who the hell cares what it looks like?*
>
> *Twilight Sparkle asked me to put up with the nuisance anyway and give Rarity our full attention and respect. Afterwards, Daybreak suggested Twilight Sparkle was looking for a way to cheer up her friend, saying something afterwards about Rarity having been a dressmaker. Honestly, I have no idea how dumping more work on somepony in that position, particularly if it is pointless work, could possibly cheer a pony up. On the other hoof, the idea that one of the Ministry Mares might be suffering Wartime Stress Disorder is terrifying, so I told Daybreak to keep that opinion carefully under wraps.*
>
> *While Twilight Sparkle was clearly disappointed with our progress on that particular project, at least she was understanding. And she was considerably more pleased with our other projects, such as the multi-gem heavy infantry battle saddle. Alpha Labs has continued to show a great deal of success in other projects, so I don't think we'll face any serious repercussions.*
>
> *She did, however, ask if there was anypony I believed we could spare to join the spellcrafting lab above us. Apparently, they are researching something called a "Bypass Spell" and have reached the point where they need a fresh mind. I told her I would get back to her on that. Tomorrow, I'm going to have a talk with Daybreak and Twinkle. I'd prefer to keep both of them as they are excellent members of the Herd. But if I'm going to end up losing one of them, I would rather it be done this way.*

I stopped skimming the reports. There were dozens more in "Ghost" alone and half a dozen other categories. Getting up, I looked around at the lab, opening locked storage containers and equipment lockers.

Oh, Calamity would be sorry he was missing this. There were tools in here I couldn't even guess the purpose of. I checked to make sure Velvet was still busy with SteelHooves, reasoning that it wasn't "sightseeing" if I had to wait anyway, then levitated a duffle bag from under one of the tables. Pulling it open and dumping out the empty cat carrier inside, I started scooping random tools and equipment into a duffle bag.

"Ready to go, Littlepip?" Velvet called out.

"Just one minute," I called back, cutting my scavenging short. But there was still one storage container that I wanted to raid before we descended into the basement – the one where I had spotted the prototype Ghostmare Suit. Or, at least, parts of it. The project had clearly never been completed, and was abandoned in the middle of a complete overhaul. Now, digging back through the container, I found something that was worth taking: one MG StealthBuck II.

⁂

With a grunt, SteelHooves forced open the elevator doors and the three of us looked down the dark shaft. Midway down, a field of blue energy cut horizontally across the shaft, blocking our way down. I sighed, unsurprised. We'd tried the stairwell to the basement already, only to find a thick metal door had slid into place, cutting off access. The entire basement was locked down tight. The only way in was to be teleported there by the Ministry building's security, and I had yet to find a way out.

"Look at the cables," Velvet whispered. "They go right down through the shield."

I nodded. I had figured that the shield had just closed around them, although it was a little surprising that they hadn't been severed. "What are you thinking?"

"Bypass spell," she responded.

"For the cables?"

"For the whole elevator," she suggested. "I know that's a long shot, but…"

SteelHooves nickered disbelievingly, "You think they put a security barrier in the elevator shaft that the *elevator* could go through?"

I bit my lower lip in thought. "Actually, that's not as silly as it sounds. The elevator would be programmed to move to the bottom when the basement was locked down, but they wouldn't want to trap anypony, so they set the barrier to allow the elevator through. That way, the barrier can activate instantly while the elevator has time to deposit any passengers on the floors above." I was talking out my tail-side, but it made at least some sense. "Once the elevator reaches the bottom, power is cut to the whole system, and the elevator is locked into position."

"So what good does that do us?" SteelHooves asked.

Velvet almost purred. "They weren't planning on Littlepip, now were they?" I knew what she was getting at. Levitate the elevator up to us, get on, and down we go. Only one problem.

"I need schematics of the elevator's mechanical system," I told them.

Velvet looked at me oddly. "Why?"

"The locking mechanism is at the bottom where I can't see it." She continued to look at me blankly. I sighed. "Look, I need to know what I'm doing before I can do it."

I looked at them. Of course they didn't understand. SteelHooves had no clue about magic at all, and Velvet Remedy's levitation magic was comparatively foalish.

"It's the same reason I can telekinetically fire a gun or pull the power supply from a turret even if I can't see it, but I can't use my magic to squeeze somepony's heart or build a rifle while blindfolded. If I can't see what I'm doing, I need to be able to picture it in my mind with a fair amount of accuracy or the magic won't manifest," I explained, hoping I didn't sound patronizing.

"I at least need a place to start if I have any chance of doing this. Like with the star-spawn. Until Pyrelight set part of it on fire, I didn't have any place to begin. In this case, since I have no idea what kind of locking mechanism I might be not-seeing, I need the schematics."

Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves both nodded.

"One schematics for the elevator coming right up."

* * *

"Oh Goddesses," Velvet Remedy whimpered. "Littlepip!"

I was studying the elevator schematics SteelHooves had found on my PipBuck. Velvet had been watching me, and I realized what she had just seen.

I looked at her, then looked away and nodded. I didn't have anything to say.

SteelHooves whinnied. I put up a hoof, signaling for him to say nothing. I didn't know if his words would be an I-told-you-so or a guilt-laden apology, but I didn't think I could handle either. I had saved him. It had cost me a bit of my pony-ness. What was done was done. I couldn't say I didn't regret it, but I could say I would do it again, even knowing the outcome.

"Really," I said, feeling a hitch in my throat. "It's not that bad. I hardly notice the itch anymore."

I shifted my attention to the shaft and the elevator below. I focused, reaching out, attempting to manifest my magic on the far side of the shield. This was a bit of a new trick, but there was no reason it shouldn't work. I remembered the super-alicorn from the Fillydelphia Crater whose shield was so powerful she couldn't manifest magic through it. This shield was nothing compared to that one. I thought of Velvet Remedy casting her anesthetic spell inside the alicorn's shield.

I could do this.

I was satisfied to see the glow of my magic surround the elevator car. I focused on the thick yet simple clamps beneath, rotating the screws that held them together until I heard them fall apart.

Concentrating, I slowly lifted the elevator car upwards, pulling it towards the energy shield. I held my breath as the top of the car reached the field of blue light. Moment of truth. Was Velvet right?

The car continued to lift, gliding through the field as if it was nothing but a film of water. I exhaled gratefully. In moments, it was hovering in front of us. I pushed the car's clattering gate open.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," I announced with a sweeping bow, "Your chariot awaits!"

* * *

As I floated the elevator car down towards the basement, Velvet Remedy and I rode alone.

The three of us had barely gotten onto the elevator when we realized the problem. With SteelHooves' extra bulk, there was barely enough room for the three of us. There was no way we would be able to fit Calamity in too. Or maneuver, as SteelHooves pointed out, if there was a turret waiting for us at the bottom.

Instead, we had left our Steel Ranger Outcast standing guard over Calamity's packs, the duffle bag and most of our weapons. Calamity would just have to wait to put on his battle saddle again.

I tapped my forehooves together tentatively. I stared at the floor of the elevator. Finally, I asked Velvet, "Little Macintosh?"

Velvet Remedy hissed, "Wrong question." I was startled by the vehemence in her voice.

"You should have asked about Pyrelight!"

Oh. I felt a twinge of guilt. "Pyrelight's not in the building according to the security system. She never got trapped in…" I stopped, feeling a sinking sensation that chilled my heart and stole my breath. The elevator car stopped moving with a jolt as my eyes widened. If Pyrelight never made it inside, that meant she was still out in the pink. A whole night in the Cloud meant death.

"I asked her to get our things as I brought SteelHooves inside," Velvet said morosely. "But I got magically thrown in that prison… that chamber… before I could prop the door open for her."

Velvet looked at me with a heartbreaking expression. "I have to imagine she gathered Little Macintosh and all your precious weapons, horded them someplace, then sat outside and waited for me." I cringed, a whimper strangling in my throat. But Velvet shook her head.

"Pyrelight's a smart bird. She's a survivor. I have to believe that she wouldn't wait too long. That she'd fly out of the Cloud, out of Canterlot. Maybe all the way back to Glyphmark and Xenith." She turned away, but I saw the drops fall from her, making damp spots on the floor. "As long as the Pink Cloud didn't get worse too quickly. As long as she wasn't taken by surprise. I have to believe that."

Speaking with confidence I didn't really have, I assured her that she was right.

I started the elevator downward again.

* * *

"Tell me where it is!" the mare's voice called out, grating across my brain.

My ears had popped.

Clank. "NO!" the Trixie-like second voice echoed in my head.

The air shimmered around us. My lungs fought for breath.

Clink-clank. "UNCHAIN US! YOUR GODDESS DEMANDS IT!"

Velvet Remedy and I slithered across the tiled basement floor, pushing aside toppled boxes of grain and shattered plates, dropped kitchen knives and leaking packages of flour. At first, we had crouched to be stealthy. But now we did it just to breathe.

"No. If I unchain us, you'll kill us both."

"YOU ARE TRYING TO KILL ME ALREADY. BETTER WE BOTH SHOULD PERISH!"

Clink-clank-clink.

I coughed, my abused lungs struggling for air. The sound was high and tight, not like a pony's cough at all, and that worried me. I coughed again, and Velvet Remedy did the same, her coughs more like a newborn's squeak-toy than any noise which should come from Velvet's throat.

We both froze, ears perking and swiveling, as we prayed the kitchen's other occupant hadn't heard us.

"We must throw the party! Our Goddess demands it!"

The alicorn hadn't heard us. She was too busy arguing with… as far as I could tell… *herself.*

I reached the end of the counter and peeked around it cautiously. The forest green alicorn was wrapped in heavy chains that bound her to a thick set of pipes in the ceiling. She stood there, looking around frantically, searching for something, a frightened but intelligent look in her eyes.

Suddenly, her demeanor changed, her eyes locking forward with a glare and her face contorting in rage. She lunged, throwing herself against the chains that bound her. *Clank-clank-clink!*

"I AM YOUR GODDESS!" the Trixie-like voice raged. It wasn't the actual voice of the Goddess, but some strange, pale imitation that echoed through my head. I realized her mouth wasn't moving. Everything I was hearing was in my head. All of it.

But how was that possible? The Pink Cloud hindered the alicorns' telepathy. I was sure of it. It cut them off from their Goddess, allowed them to regain some of their individuality again. Granted, while the kitchens were full of some sort of gas, it wasn't Pink Cloud. But there was Pink Cloud all around this building.

Even as I thought that, my eyes drifted to the alicorn's flank and caught there. The alicorn had a cutie mark! It looked odd, like maybe a mist of stars, but I couldn't be sure. The mere fact that the alicorn had one at all shook my conceptions. The alicorn's flanks quivered with effort as she lunged again, the chains pulling taut, holding her back.

I followed her gaze. It looked like she was trying to get to the ovens.

"I HELPED YOU! I WAS THERE FOR YOU WHEN SHE WAS SILENT. I WHISPERED TO YOU WHEN YOU COULDN'T BEAR THE SILENCE IN YOUR HEAD. I CODDLED YOU. ME! NOT HER!" the not-Trixie voice ranted. "AND YOU BETRAY ME! I WILL KILL YOU FOR THAT!"

Without the Goddess, I had surmised that the alicorns were cut off from their collective pool of magic. That they were left with just their inherent magics, the alicorn shields, and maybe a spell or two. I had to revise that theory.

Or not. Purple alicorns teleport. Blue ones turn invisible. The green ones do that weird statue thing. But what if that was part of a broader gift? The green alicorns were the telepaths! Even cut off from the Goddess, they still had their gift. If anything, the Goddess probably borrowed that magical talent from them.

I felt Velvet Remedy slide past me, slipping ahead. I looked back at the alicorn.

"This was our mission." The original voice was back. The alicorn stopped struggling and resumed her search. I froze again as she looked right past me and missed me. The alicorn was showing raider-tier obliviousness.

"We are so close. I will not fail now!" I watched her muzzle, but her mouth never moved. This whole argument was taking place in her head… and by extension, in ours.

Then I saw something that rocked me. The alicorn's cutie mark had faded away, reminding me of a filly in my class back in Stable Two who tried to have her father conjure up her cutie mark early using magic. Each time, a new mark would appear, only to fade away, just like this.

Only the alicorn's cutie mark didn't just fade away. A cutie mark of a flask with bubbling green liquid replaced it. The alicorn's new cutie mark struck a chord of déjà vu. I'd seen it before.

A moment later, the alicorn's demeanor changed again, and as I watched, the bubbling flask cutie mark faded and the starry mist resumed its place. "WHY? WHY GO BACK TO HER? I'M BETTER. I'M HERE ONLY FOR YOU. ALWAYS."

Clank-clank-clink-clink-clank-clink!

I began to crawl away, shaken and a little freaked by what I had seen. Your cutie mark is an integral part of you, a symbol of your special talent. How could it change like that? Even when you were depressed, even when you were at your worst, you were still you.

Your cutie mark never abandoned you.

"AND I'M BETTER AT MAGIC TOO! SHE SAID IT COULDN'T BE DONE. 'NO SMALL RODENTS OF ANY KIND,' SHE SAID. BUT I DID IT! I'M THE ONE WHO FOUND THE SPELL! I'M THE ONE WHO CAST IT WHILE YOU WHIMPERED IN A CORNER…"

* * *

Calamity was curled up in the far corner of a small cell behind both a magical shield and a locked gate. I had to hold my breath while I hacked the security terminal that dropped the shield. At even a yard up, the air became impossible to breathe.

Cracking the computer took me several tries. It was difficult to concentrate, especially with the alicorn's telepathic argument being broadcast non-stop into my head.

The moment the shield vanished, Velvet and I scrambled on our bellies to his cell. Velvet reached her hooves between the bars, touching them to his as he slid close.

"Don't!" he squeaked, seeing me eye the lock.

I froze, not from his warning but the high-pitched, squeaky voice that had come out of his muzzle.

"Hydrogen," he squeaky-warned. "The air is full o' it. One spark, from yer gun or yer horn, an' we all roast."

It was like listing to a small woodland creature. Only cuter and sillier. I snorted, trying to hold in a laugh. I tried to distract myself with the seriousness of our situation. *You'd think,* the terminal entry had said, *after all the work we put in on talismans for their ridiculous balloons, they'd be more cooperative.* The Ministry of Magic had created hydrogen talismans for the Ministry of Morale. There was probably one in "high security storage" down here. And it had been activated.

But if I couldn't use magic or weapons, how was I going to get Calamity's cell open?

"Better figure out somethin' fast, Li'lpip," the woodland-critter voice coming from Calamity insisted. "This place is gonna become un-breathable give it another hour. Ah reckon the only reason it took this long is cuz this place is *huge.*"

I covered my muzzle with both forehooves, tears in my eyes.

"Ah caught mention of there bein' a hangar down here," he added squeakily.

That did it. I couldn't hold it in anymore. Despite my difficulty breathing, I found myself laughing so hard I was rolling on the floor. The high-pitched sounds of my own laughter just made me guffaw harder.

"Yeah, yuk it up, why don'tcha?" Calamity glowered at me. And now even Velvet was laughing. "But would one o' y'all kindly get the damn key and get me outta here? B'fore that alicorn drives *me* crazy?" He was hilarious. I stomped a hoof on the floor, dying.

"Sing something first," Velvet Remedy suggested, her own voice even higher. Calamity snorted.

* * *

"Thank y'all" Calamity said as he slipped something pink into his pack. I blinked, realizing he'd managed to pilfer something even under these conditions.

"Now let's get outta here before the crazy lady downstairs manages t' blow this buildin' up t' the Enclave," Calamity suggested urgently as he shrugged on his battle saddle, his voice almost back to normal.

Velvet Remedy looked fretfully back at the empty elevator shaft. "I… I wish I had a way to help her," she said softly.

"What? Help the crazy alicorn? Why?"

Velvet Remedy gave Calamity a stern look. "She's obviously suffering. Can you imagine having someone in your head as a constant companion for lifetimes and then suddenly losing her? I saw her cutie marks…"

"Marks?" Calamity asked. "As in, plural?"

Velvet nodded. "One of them was from one of the ponies on those videos the Goddess showed us. "I believe that alicorn was one of the first. She's had the Goddess in her mind for centuries." Velvet looked back to the elevator again. "Then… to come here and suddenly lose that? I'm not surprised she was traumatized. I'm surprised more aren't."

Calamity raised his eyebrows. "So the Pink Cloud is makin' alicorn's insane? That settles it. We need t' go t' the castle."

"What?"

"I'll explain later. Let's get outta here." Within minutes, we were galloping through the lobby.

Panting, I stopped and looked out at the wall of Pink Cloud. It wasn't lethally thick yet, not like the places where it pooled, but it was bad enough to filter out most of the light. It was past dawn and it looked like it was past dusk.

"Was there anything you could have said, maybe?" I wondered, seeing how distraught Velvet was beginning to look. Pyrelight was nowhere in sight (which was a good thing, realistically, but it had to be feeding her distress).

The pretty unicorn mare shook her head, her white mane with its colored stripes whipping about. "No, Littlepip. The only way to help the poor thing now is with years of therapy," she said, looking at me sadly. "You can't heal true psychological trauma with a super restoration potion, or with a quick conversation of pretty words and psychobabble."

"Ah was right," Calamity announced. "Ah hate t' say Ah told ya so… naw, after that singin' bit, Ah'm downright happy t' say Ah told ya so." He landed at the front doors to the Ministry of Arcane Sciences and stared at us. "So… Ah told ya so!"

"Told us what?" Velvet asked politely as we trotted up to him.

"What singing?" SteelHooves questioned. I found myself snickering again.

Calamity nickered, rolling his eyes. "The zebras' megaspell. It's still goin'… sorta."

I stopped snickering. "Where is it?"

"What do you mean, sort of?" Velvet questioned.

"We should leave this building," SteelHooves reminded us.

Calamity nodded to him. "Right. Ah'll tell ya when we get next door." It was morning. We'd lost a good chunk of a day, and the Pink Cloud was going to be thick enough that we wanted to take the rest of the journey in small bites. Next door to the Ministry of Technology, then across to the Ministry of Image. Finally, from there to the Ministry of Awesome. Hopefully, the rest of the Ministry buildings would be more like the Ministry of Peace than this one.

We opened the door and charged into the Pink Cloud.

The distance we had to cross was less than a city block. I was sure we could make it easily. No distractions.

"Look!" Velvet shouted, pointing to one of the garbage bins alongside the building. There was a smear on it that looked like a flame. I groaned inwardly, rolling my eyes, and trotted over to it. Calamity was faster and already had it open by the time I got there.

Inside were our weapons and gear. Pyrelight had stashed them in the bin and marked it. With birdshit. Not wanting to risk leaving anything behind, I floated the contents of the garbage bin out and carried it with us, refuse and all.

The alicorns were on us, their shields up, before we made it halfway. SteelHooves turned and opened fire. But Spitfire's Thunder was somewhere in a mass of rotten rubbish floating behind me, and none of the weapons we had at the ready could penetrate those shields.

So we ran, panting, galloping for the doors of the Ministry of Technology as fast as we could. The doors were glass; the entire front façade of the Ministry was glass, a matrix of clear panes that rose three stories high. The rest of the building had an elegant simplicity – stately, functional, with an almost masculine grace. The king on the chessboard. I hoped the glass was enforced somehow. Otherwise, the alicorns would just plow through it.

The steps up to the Ministry building were piled with the skeletons of long-dead ponies. I raced by a unicorn stallion whose hooves had sunken into the concrete steps, and jumped the body of a younger mare whose bones had taken on the pattern of the dress she had been wearing on the day of the Pink Cloud.

I noticed the jumble of skeletons blanketing the marble floor inside the Ministry's grand foyer as well, but I didn't think anything of it until I telekinetically pulled open the glass doors and charged into a flood of static. I screamed as fresh but familiar agony skewered my brain. I stumbled and turned towards the exit, only to see my friends race into the room and all but SteelHooves get slammed to the floor. Outside, the alicorns landed, closing the doors and stood there, holding them closed with their shields. We had been herded into a trap!

I looked around, dropping the garbage I was carrying onto the skeletons of several dead ponies as I frantically searched. I almost immediately spotted three, and before I could focus enough to pull up a weapon, I'd spotted two more.

"There… are dozens!" Velvet Remedy squealed, clutching her head, blood running out of her eyes and ears. Lashing out with my magic, I tried to wrap all of the skeletons, intending to toss the whole contents of the room up onto one of the mezzanines above. Excruciating torture ripped through my horn, blackening my vision.

Somewhere, I heard a voice shouting, "Shut them down!" Then, for the second time in half a day, I passed out.

* * *

I was locked into what seemed like the longest, most boring memory ever. My host was skimming over sheets of paperwork: non-disclosure contracts, agreements to drug and loyalty testing, acceptance of possible mandatory relocation, and so on. Each sheet bore an emblem of a large star ringed by smaller ones and circumscribed by a horn and wings. Each had the header of an official Ministry of Arcane Technologies document.

My host was either a speed reader or she wasn't really reading that closely. Occasionally, she would look up, glancing sheepishly at the bored mare sitting behind her desk, or watching the door beside the desk. The first time she did so, I realized I knew where we were by the fanciful design of the door and the ornate lighting. This was Tenpony Tower. My host never looked up long though before returning to the clipboard filled with paperwork.

Every so often, she would levitate a quill, dipping it in ink, and sign her name.

Trixie.

We looked up, Trixie and I, when the door opened and a smiling Twilight Sparkle stepped out. "Trixie, I'm very happy you could make it!"

"I… I wouldn't have missed this opportunity." We quickly signed the last page and floated the clipboard to the mare at the desk (who was now sitting at the sort of alert attention that only comes from ponies who were slacking just before their boss walked in).

"Please, come in," Twilight said, standing aside. Slowly, almost humbly, Trixie stepped through the doorway.

Inside was a nice office, not ostentatious in the slightest, mostly filled with shelves holding books and various knick-knacks of magical or personal importance. As Trixie's eyes wandered over the room, I spotted a jar with several delicate purple-spotted lavender shards floating in preserving liquid. The jar was labeled "Spike's Egg".

Twilight Sparkle walked in behind us, closing the door, and moved around to sit at her desk. She looked over her desk with a slight frown and, apparently deciding it seemed too formal, walked back around the desk and sat on a floor cushion, offering another to Trixie.

"Miss Sparkle…" Trixie began. I could feel her nervousness.

"Oh please, call me Twilight," she beamed. "So, tell me, been working on any new tricks lately?"

I felt my host stammer a moment, then draw herself up, breathing deeply. With a prideful voice, she boasted, "Why yes! In fact, just the other day, I invented an invisibility spell! Would you like to see?"

Twilight Sparkle blinked. "You. Invented. An invisibility spell?"

"Indeed! Have you ever known another unicorn who could do this?" I felt the surge of magic as my host cast her spell. Twilight Sparkle gasped.

"You… Trixie, you're actually invisible!" Twilight reached out, prodding us with a hoof, making sure we were actually still there and hadn't teleported away. "That's… amazing!"

I felt the spell ebb then collapse. It clearly wasn't long lasting. Still, Trixie sat up, smiling broadly. "See? Am I not still the Great and Powerful Trixie?"

Twilight gazed at her. As seconds ticked by, I could feel sweat bead on my host's forehead. “And you invented this spell yourself?”

“Why yes! I…” All at once, Trixie seemed to deflate. “No.” She stared at the floor, scuffing it with her hoof. “I mean, yes, I created the spell. But only after I got ahold of one of those new StealthBucks and figured out how to cast the magic myself.”

Twilight’s expression softened. “Thank you for being honest with me.”

Trixie nodded. “I’ll… see myself out.”

“No!” Twilight said swiftly. “No… it’s all right. I’m still *really* impressed. Those StealthBucks were created by my Ministry…”

Trixie winced.

“…and we reverse-engineered them from zebra magic. But none of my unicorns have been able to re-create it in spell form. I have a whole division in Canterlot who have spent years trying to do what you just did and failing.”

Trixie looked up again, surprised. I felt a burning in her eyes. She was holding back tears.

“What you have done is incredible. You *should* be proud. And don’t be nervous. You’ve already got the job,” Twilight Sparkle smiled. “That is, if you still want it. I hope all that out there didn’t put you off.”

“Oh no! Not at all,” Trixie said hurriedly. “I really want to work for the Ministry, *your* Ministry.” Then in a softer voice, “And I need this job.”

“Oh dear.” Twilight’s eyes widened. “Trixie, what happened?”

“Well… you know…” She sighed. “Things did not go well for me after Ponyville. I’d lost my home. Word spread about how you defeated that Ursa Minor and how I…” She shook her head. “I was a laughingstock, only I was too proud and blind to see it. My shows starting bringing jeers instead of cheers. And then they stopped bringing anypony at all. Money ran out. Nopony would hire the ‘Great and Powerful’ Trixie. I had to take… unpleasant jobs…”

Trixie looked aside. “Things actually got better for me when the war started. Ponies stopped caring about my reputation. It was long enough ago, and they had other things to hate.”

“Oh… oh Trixie, I never knew.”

Trixie looked into Twilight’s concerned expression, then at the floor. “Honestly, I’m surprised you would want me here.”

Twilight smiled. “Well, I remember you as a skilled and talented unicorn with an impressive repertoire of spells. And I’m happy to have you with us. I have a new project, and I need volunteers.” She paused. “There is one thing. You will have to allow us to record one of your memories.”

Trixie’s eyes widened. “You… you want to see my memories?”

Twilight Sparkle shook her head. “Just one of them. And the memory of this meeting will do just fine.”

Trixie looked askance, “This one? Well… that’s not so bad then. But…why?”

“This war,” Twilight Sparkle explained, “Will be won by the side with superior magic. We’re working on a potion that will transform a normal pony into…”

She paused, then spit it out, “Into an alicorn.”

Trixie gasped.

“And no, I’m not joking. We’re ready to test it. And I wanted to ask you to be the first." Twilight Sparkle looked nervous. She understood the gravity of what she was asking of my host, even if Trixie really did not.

"An… alicorn? You mean like Princess Celestia?"

"And Princess Luna, yes." Twilight's tone was very serious. "This is transformation magic of the highest order. We need a memory of yours for comparison. Before and after. We don't think that being changed into an alicorn will affect your psyche, but we can't be sure."

With that, she put a gently hoof on Trixie. "We've taken every precaution. I wouldn't ask anypony to do this if I wasn't absolutely sure it would work and that it would be safe. But still… I know it is asking a lot. Too much. This potion would change who you are. What you are."

Trixie gulped.

"If you don't want to do this, you can back out at any time." Twilight Sparkle smiled. "And I promise you'll still have a job with the Ministry. I'll make sure of it."

Trixie was silent for a long time. I could feel a tremor pass through her. But then, slowly and softly, she said, "I'll do it. I don't mind being changed. I'm not the greatest fan of who I am anymore. Haven't been for a long time. Maybe… this way I'll actually be able to be who I thought I was."

Twilight Sparkle's eyes danced with joy. "Then welcome to the Ministry of Arcane Sciences, Trixie! If you don't mind, I'd like to get started right away." Twilight Sparkle stood up abruptly, moving towards the door.

"Are you free for the rest of the weekend? I'd like you to come out to Maripony with me. I've got a couple ponies who I really want you to meet." She let out a little squee. "Oh, I can't wait to see their faces when you turn invisible!"

"Who?" Trixie asked as my host got up, trotting after her.

Twilight turned back with a smile. "Gestalt and Mosaic. They're my head researchers. Twins and some of the most amazing spellcasters you'll ever meet." With a sheepish grin, "Next to you and I, of course. I normally leave them in charge at my Ministry Hub in Canterlot, but they're at Maripony now, overseeing final preparations.

"You'll like them. They have a cute way of finishing each other's sentences," Twilight grinned. "And you want to hear something really impressive? I've seen them finish each other's *spells* too!"

Finish each other's thoughts and each other's spells. The foundations for telepathy and spell-sharing. An epiphany washed over me. I suddenly understood why there were three breeds of alicorn, why they had the abilities they did… even why all the alicorns were female!

Dozens of ponies were absorbed into what became the Goddess, but it was Trixie's mind which became dominant. The behavior of my host wasn't much like that of the Goddess, but there were shadows of her there. The Goddess was lurking in some part of her psyche, waiting to be tapped.

But, it wasn't just Trixie who held power. There were four ponies within the amalgam that formed the Goddess who were powerful enough to exert influence over the alicorn creation process.

Blue is invisibility. Purple can teleport. The greens are telepathic and can work together to create greater effects with their shields.

Four ponies, all mares.

I wondered, if the Goddess consumed me, would a new breed of alicorns begin with extra-powerful telekinetics?

Would Red Eye only be able to create alicorn stallions?

My thoughts were interrupted as Trixie stopped, asking nerviously. “And… they’ll be impressed… with me?”

“Oh, I guarantee it!”

* * *

I kept my eyes closed, holding to the peace of rest just a little while longer. I was alive, and I felt uninjured. Even the headaches had gone away. I wanted to stay like that just a little while longer. Because waking up meant returning to my life, and that meant pain.

It also meant friends. I had no desire to stay asleep forever. Just a little while longer. A few minutes. That was all I wanted.

The noises around me were strange. Gravelly voices, the clopping of hoofsteps, and the high-pitched whine that had been ever present throughout my childhood.

The alicorns had set a trap. A scarily clever one. When I had fallen into the reflecting pool, the alicorns had observed how I dealt with traps by using my telekinesis, and this time they had not only anticipated it, but used it against me with a trap that attacked me faster through my magic. The realization was terrifying. I had no idea why it didn’t work. They should have killed us all.

My eyes opened to the overly familiar sight of a Stable clinic ceiling.

Wait. What?

“Welcome to Stable City,” rumbled the voice of a stallion standing nearby. His eyes glowed as his rotted body shambled towards me, the filthy evening cloak on his back having melted into his skin. I looked around. The architecture hit all the familiar Stable notes, but everypony around me was a Canterlot Ghoul.

The ghoul stallion stomped, drawing my attention. “Now we have treated you and your friends. Consider that on the house for the show your party put on yesterday. We in Stable City are willing to extend the benefit of the doubt to anypony that those monsters hate so much.”

He reached up a fetid hoof and tapped my horn warningly. I could see he wore a PipBuck; it was melted to his flesh like mine. Only his had a broadcaster attached, one that had been mercifully switched off. “But only so far. The broadcasters out in the foyer keep those monsters outside. Most of us have taken to wearing them as well, in case we need to step out.”

He saw my eyes widen. “Don’t worry. None of us keep them on while we’re inside, the static is highly annoying – unless we are on guard patrol. Or unless you give us reason to. One wrong step, and every citizen of Stable City becomes walking death to you living folk. So you and your breather friends behave now. Clear?”

I nodded. Very clear.

"Now, I believe there is someone who has been waiting…" the ghoul stallion began, only to be cut off by the sound of a squeal from Velvet Remedy somewhere nearby.

"…ah. It seems to have found your other unicorn first." The ghoul concluded, but I had already jumped down and was racing through the clinic, dodging between ghouls. I slid to a stop as I spotted Velvet. Then trotted forward, feeling a warm smile break across my muzzle. She was sitting up in a medical bed, her face full of joy, with Pyrelight dancing gleefully through the air around her.

* * *

"Good day, gentle ghouls of Stable City (you miserable, rotting slabs of ambulatory meat)!" the floating robot called out, greeting random citizens of Stable City as they passed it in the hall.

Calamity walked beside me, having found the hallway of the Stable too confining to fly in. The ghouls gave us odd and curious looks as they passed.

"…Li'lpip, ya lost part of yerself," Calamity was saying.

I looked down at my PipBuck-foreleg and a pained frown immediately swept over my muzzle; I forced myself to smile. "More like had something added, actually."

"Don't go using specific details to muddy the issue," Calamity warned. "The truth is, a loss like that pains a pony, an' Ah'm not talkin' just physically. An' it ain't brave t' pretend ya ain't hurtin'. It ain't smart neither."

I stayed silent.

"When Velvet Remedy lost her leg," Calamity recalled, "She was a right mess, even after she got it back."

"Sorry, Calamity," I chuckled wryly, "But I don't think I'll be indulging in the same therapy."

"Don't be a manticore's backside, Li'lpip," Calamity said crossly. "When we get outta here, we need t' go back t' Tenpony Tower an' y'all need t' spend…"

"No!" I barked. I looked at Calamity, his wings up and eyes wide, clearly taken aback by my abruptness and the strength of my refusal. More pleasantly, I complained, "We've become experts at not getting what we need to do done. After Canterlot, we go right to Splendid Valley. No more delays, no more side quests, no more distractions. We get the damn job done."

Calamity didn't speak for a while. In the background, I could hear the robot saying, "Hello, ma'am. I do hope the morning finds you in good health. (As if that could ever happen.)"

We rounded the corner and found ourselves looking at a Stable Atrium. The place had been renovated to hold a plethora of shops and small stands where Canterlot Ghouls traded goods and services for bits and wares.

As we started down the stairs, Calamity asked me softly, "Are you okay, Li'lpip?" It was a stupid question considering the conversation immediately prior, but I ignored that as I heard the concern in his voice.

"I'm weary, Calamity. I'm getting worn out," I admitted dourly. "I need this job to be over. To get out from under this threat, this mission." I looked up, scanning the Stable City marketplace. "Then, after that, I can rest. Maybe, when this is over, I'll just lay down and take a nap for a century or few. But not before."

We reached the bottom of the steps. The place looked like a right lively little necropolis. The only thing that struck me as missing was any sort of diner or foodstuffs vendor. I supposed ghouls didn't really need those. I was suddenly keenly aware of how hungry I was and how long it had been since I had eaten.

"How about you?" I asked in return as we approached a store labeled Caliber's Guns and Ammo.

"Me? Ah'm doin'…" He paused as I turned to him and pointedly raised an eyebrow. "T'ain't fair, throwin' muh own words back at me."

"I didn't say anything."

He neighed. Then, brushing his brow beneath his desperado hat, he admitted, "Ah'm not doin' so good, actually. Ah keep thinkin' 'bout those bandit's back at Arbu. An' the ponies up at Bucklyn Cross." He frowned. "Now, the bandits Ah can rightly live with. Accordin' t' the old man, half o' 'em came from Arbu, but they were still bandits. They were still ambushin' a merchant."

He looked at me, "Ah know y'all think bein' a bandit is a downright noble step up from bein' what the folks in Arbu were. But from muh perspective, the moment those folks in Arbu started killin' folk fer their meat, they weren't no better than bandits."

I nodded. My own feelings were… considerably different. But my horrific actions in Arbu voided any validity those feeling might have had.

"But Bucklyn Cross? That's another matter," Calamity shook his head, nickering bitterly. "We went there demandin' somethin' and ended up killin' 'em fer it."

"That…" my jaw dropped. "Calamity, that's not how it went down at all!" We tried to negotiate. They fired first. We were trying to get something they didn't need to give to ponies who were suffering without it. We had something to trade and were trying. They risked their Elder's life! We… we weren't raiders.

"Ain't it?" he asked me, clearly unsure. "Ain't it jus' a li'l how that went down?"

I stomped, shaking my head. "No."

Still unconvinced, Calamity stepped up to the door of the weapons shop. "If ya take from the rich an' give t' the poor, yer still just a raider," he said as the door slid up.

"No!" I said firmly. "You're not. A bandit maybe, at best. But not a raider. And you know better." I couldn't believe my kleptomaniac pegasus was arguing this. "Some would call you a hero."

Bucklyn Cross had to be disturbing Calamity deeply for his thoughts to have plunged into such uncharacteristic and messy logic. Maybe Velvet was right and we all needed years of therapy.

Stepping into the store after him, I put a hoof on his shoulder. Then, not knowing how else I could help, I hugged him.

"Not in my shop," the little dead colt behind the store counter coughed in disgust. "If you're looking for *that,* it's two floors up."

* * *

The colt shoved the missiles across the counter to Calamity. "One or two of these anti-armor missiles are pretty much guaranteed to take down an alicorn's shield and make a very pretty mess of the winged bitch inside." He looked at what Calamity was offering in return. Leave it to Calamity to not only retrieve all our weapons and supplies, but to go through the garbage for anything else that might be good for a trade. "This all will get you these five. Toss in one of those magical energy weapons, and I can give you all eight."

Calamity raised an eyebrow. He was no Velvet Remedy, but he had fair bartering chops of his own and I could tell he thought he was being snookered. "Three missiles don't equal a top-o'-the-line magical energy weapon, not even iffin they're all as fancy as ya claim they are."

The colt bit, "Oh they are. One of the benefits of living in the Ministry of Wartime Technology. We have all sorts of toys you living folk haven't even heard of." I was willing to bet he was right. I was also willing to bet most of it was either in questionable prototype stages or stocked in too limited a supply to sell.

"If these work so well against alicorn shields, then why haven't you used them against the alicorns?" I asked reasonably.

It had not been hard to glean that the ghouls of Stable City had been fighting with the alicorns since they started showing up in the Canterlot Ruins about a decade ago. From the impression I got, the ghouls were losing and were now effectively contained in the Ministry they called home.

The colt frowned. "Eight missiles aren't much use against a few dozen of those winged bitches. That magic rifle, on the other hoof, can rack up quite the kill count over a couple years of sniping."

Calamity whinnied. "Well, then sounds t' me like the rifle is worth all eight. But Ah'll give it to ya fer six and we'll call me the Element of Generosity."

The colt made the trade, although from his expression, he'd be calling Calamity quite a few other things shortly after we left.

"Now, what do y'all have fer rifle ammo?"

The colt shook his head, giving a snorting chuckle. "Sorry, but I can't help you. If you want ammo, you'll have to look elsewhere."

Calamity blinked. Then made an exaggerated act of reading the store sign. "Ah thought the name of the store was Caliber's Guns and *Ammo.* How do you not have ammo? You only sell two things."

"Ha ha," the little ghoul said dryly. "My ammo's all stored in an ammo vender for safe-keeping. Only the damn thing is busted and I can't get it to dispense. So no ammo."

Calamity began to smile. "Oh, Ah bet Ah could fix that fer ya. Fer, what say, a ten percent discount on ammo?" I thought Velvet Remedy would have been so proud.

The colt ghoul's eyes lit up (literally) as he asked, "Definitely! If you're sure you can do it."

Calamity laughed. "With the number o' times Ah've broken inta them things t' pilfer 'em, Ah reckon it might jus' do muh karma some good t' be fixin' one up fer once." He gave me a wink. Our earlier conversation still hung in the air, but it was good to see Calamity in brighter spirits.

Calamity rubbed his hoof on the colt's head. "Don't worry, uncle Calamity will have it all taken care of." He flew over the counter and trotted back towards the modified Ironshod's Ammo Emporium vending machine, leaving the ghoul colt staring at him in disdainful amusement.

"I'm a century older than you."

* * *

"So what can you tell me about this place?" I asked Caliber, the twelve-decade-old Canterlot Ghoul in the body of a colt as we watched Calamity work. He had half the machine taken apart already, and occasionally graced us with an "ayep" or a "dagnabbit".

"It's a gun shop," Caliber snarked. "I sell guns. And, usually, ammo."

"I meant about Stable City," I clarified. "We're new here."

Caliber put on airs of false surprise. "Really? You mean there haven't been two breathers living in Stable City that I just hadn't noticed?"

I brushed it off, asking, "How did a group of ghouls end up living in a Stable?"

Caliber sighed, quickly giving up on deflating my desire to pester him with questions. "Stable One was built to protect the Princesses, the nobility, the government officials and the higher-ups of the Ministries. Or, at least, that was what Stable-Tec told everypony. They built Stable One into this building because apparently the top ponies of Stable-Tec and the Ministry of Wartime Technology were real chummy."

Well yes, they were *sisters.*

"Anyway, when the Pink Cloud came, a whole bunch of ponies from all around, mostly from the castle and the Ministries, tried to gallop over to Stable One, hoping they could get in. After all, while they were safe from the Pink Cloud in any of the Ministry buildings – except possibly for the Ministry of Peace – only Stable One had a long-term food supply. It was come here or starve.

"Of course, all those ponies had to run through the Cloud to get here, and a whole lot of them didn't make it. Those who did found that the fuckers already in Stable One had closed it early. They were once again trapped in a safe haven without food, but then most of them 'expired' overnight, having suffered just enough exposure to turn them into ghouls. They didn't need food anymore after that. So it all worked out.

"Karmic justice, since Stable-Tec pretty much killed all the ponies in Stable One. The ghouls had already started a town inside the building by the time it opened up. When they added the resources of Stable One, the town became Stable City."

I listened intently. "How about you?" I asked Caliber once he thought he was done.

"Ugh," he groaned. "Are all breathers this nosy?"

"Yes," I said just because I could.

"Fine. I was born in Stable Three. Stable Three was constructed underground." He looked at me expectantly. Then sighed when it became clear I didn't know how big a deal that was. "You think the Pink Cloud out there is bad? That's nothing. You go underground, to any of the sewers or maintenance tunnels or under-rails and you'll see bad. Then, being a breather, you'll die. It's *solid Pink* down there. Down there, the Pink Cloud is alive. And hungry. It was only a matter of time before it found its way in."

That got a jump from me. Followed by a look of disbelief.

"Of course ponies like you scoff. The one alicorn who ever tried talking to us instead of attacking us scoffed too. But I tell you true, the Pink Cloud is alive down there. I've heard it breathing."

Caliber shrugged. Then the colt rambled off in breathless rapid succession, "Anyway, the Pink Cloud got me. I died. Became a ghoul. So did my parents. The Pink Cloud ate Stable Three, so we came here. Then the alicorns came, killed my parents. Now it's just me. Which is fine, because I'm old enough to be your grandfather's great grandfather. I run a gun store. I sell guns and ammo. Usually. *Ta-da!* We've come full circle. Question time over."

Calamity had stopped his work and was looking at me with a knowing expression. While Caliber wasn't looking, he mouthed: *we need to talk.*

* * *

"A… *DRAGON?!*"

"Ayep," Calamity claimed as we trotted towards the open door of Stable One. "A big, mammoth, behemoth, super-old dragon."

Just beyond stretched a large, open area of the Ministry building which had once been used for processing. But the ghouls had converted it into a sort of liberal arts common room. A two-pony band had started playing, one on a glass harp and the other on a glass armonica. The music that floated in through Stable One's entrance was beautifully haunting, crystalline and strangely disorienting. It was the music of ghosts.

"How is the Pink Cloud a dragon?" I asked, confusion overcoming my initial shock.

"It's not… exactly…" Calamity struggled. "It's… weird, okay. Look, ya know how the zebra balefire bombs work, right? They take a balefire egg an' weave it into a megaspell… talisman… thingy. Or somethin'. Anyway, the Pink Cloud megaspell was the same way. They took a bunch o' those things they used against Littlehorn, which best Ah figure are essentially like water talismans only fer Pink Cloud, an' wove them into a megaspell… thingy."

"Okay," I said, nodding. I was fairly sure I was following what Calamity was saying better than he did. "But how does that…?"

"Well, if ya want t' build a talisman that's gonna last a long time, or at least long enough t' kill someone whose really hard t' put down, what d'ya make it out of?"

Oh. I had a sinking feeling in my gut. "You use gemstones."

I paused as we reached a water fountain. Stable One had a functioning water talisman. I tested the fountain, holding my PipBuck leg close to it, but there was no sign of contamination. I ran it a bit, but there was no hint of pink.

"Ayep," Calamity said as I gulped down water from the fountain. It was not a true substitute for food, but it would do. "This Pink Cloud megaspell talisman was jus' chuck fulla gemstones."

I saw where this was going. "The dragon ate it, didn't he?"

"Ayep. An' the dragon's a she. The dragon that guards the royal treasury, t' be exact."

As we reached the entryway, I paused, observing a glowing terminal. My curiosity got the better of me. "Hold up," I asked Calamity.

I poked at the terminal and was surprised to find that it had already been hacked and the information on it was freely available to anypony who was interested. That information consisted of a single audio file. I downloaded it into my… foreleg.

Turning back to Calamity, I commented, "Okay, now the secret passage makes sense."

"How ya figure?"

"Well, Princess Celestia's school was obviously using baby dragons for *something.* They had to come from somewhere," I reasoned. "I think the Princess had some sort of arrangement with the dragon. She got the biggest horde in Equestria and the Princess got… well, her children." The royal treasury dragon was mommy.

Calamity nodded. "Well, seems the dragon digested the megaspell or somethin'. It changed her, became part o' her. Right now, she's asleep in the treasury, an' she's *snoring* Pink Cloud."

Well fuckity-fuck. I now understood how Canterlot's Pink Cloud survived after centuries of week-long rains. And why the Cloud was so dense in underground passages. The cloud would have gotten into the secret passage, started eating away at its walls, and from there it would have gone… everywhere. Sewers, tunnels, you name it.

"She prob'ly doesn't look a thing like a dragon anymore neither," Calamity mused. "Ya gotta figure she's fused t' her horde. The whole damned treasury." He kicked at the metal railing next to the steps leading out. "So much fer dreams o' lootin' the royal treasure. Such a waste."

I rolled my eyes. Then asked, "How do you know all this anyway?"

Calamity turned to me. "Cuz while y'all were vacationin', Ah was stuck down in the hole with crazy alicorn lady. Y'all jus' got a few minutes o' loony town. Ah had that damn argument running through muh head non-stop all damned night!"

He let out a loud whicker. "Ah picked up a few things from alla that."

A sign hanging on the wall next to the Stable's gear-shaped maw read:

Artistic Commons
No broadcasters please.

We stepped out through the open, gear-shaped door and paused, hearing the music more fully now. I felt the urge to move aside somewhere, lay down, forget about dragons and necromantic clouds and everything else. To just listen as the ethereal tones moved strangely through my soul.

⁂

Calamity and I were still in the Artistic Commons, lulled by the music, when SteelHooves found us. The armor-clad ghoul trotted up heavily, stopping for us just long enough to demand, "Come with me." He was trotting back through the crowd of Canterlot Ghouls before I even fully registered his presence.

I struggled to my hooves, feeling sluggish, relaxed and strangely off-balance. Calamity stretched out his wings, giving a few lazy flaps before lifting himself into the air. The ceiling of the processing area was three-ponies high, giving him just enough room to maneuver between the maze of ghouls, easels and displays below, and the light fixtures above.

SteelHooves kept a brisk pace, weaving dispassionately between the residents of Stable City. I had to wonder what this was like for him. He had anticipated nothing but poison, death and monsters in the Canterlot Ruins. And while those existed in great abundance, we had also found a pocket of civilization – a community composed of Canterlot Ghouls like himself.

As we started climbing one of several flights of stairs, my stomach rumbled, again protesting my lack of a proper breakfast or lunch. I distracted myself by putting in my earbloom and playing the audio recording from the Stable One terminal.

The voice was very familiar, which made the beginning of the recording all the more jarring. There was wetness in her voice; she had clearly been crying. But no more. Now, while the bitterness and sorrow remained, the hurt was gone and a cold anger had nested in its place.

> *"Hello. And goodbye.*
>
> *"My name is Scootaloo. You probably know me as the vice-president of Stable-Tec, the company who designed and built the Stable you have taken refuge in. But right now, I'm talking to you as one of the very, very many ponies you fuckers have murdered.*
>
> *"You. The Ministries, the heads of Equestria, the Princesses if you're in here. You killed us all with your stupid, senseless war. And now I'm returning the favor.*
>
> *"I'll admit, I gave a lot of serious thought to just keeping the door of Stable One from sealing properly and letting you all die from whatever horror you hid yourselves from while the rest of Canterlot's ponies, and all the rest of Equestria, perished. All…*
>
> *"All the ponies that we were unable to save.*
>
> *"…*
>
> *"But that's the whole point of the Stables. Above and beyond everything else, the Stables are meant to save people. (Yes, 'people'. I'm happy to report that one of the Stables has been built to save as many of Equestria's zebras as possible, the ones that you fuckers shoved into a dump and tried to forget about. And Stable Fourteen is currently housing many of Equestria's griffins… But the Stables were mostly built to save ponies. Even ponies like you.) It is for that reason alone that you're all going to live out the rest of your natural lives in Stable One, as will your children. Regardless of the conditions existing outside.*
>
> *"I have seen to it that Stable One will not open so long as even one of you is still alive. (Which, if the Princesses are in there, might be a very long time.) No matter how fast Equestria heals, not a single damn one of you is going to get to profit from what you have done. Equestria is something you ponies don't deserve."*
>
> *"I hope your souls rot for eternity."*

⁂

SteelHooves led us to the border of Stable City – a once rather drearily officious room labeled "Ministry of Wartime Technologies – Subsidy Application Center" which had been converted into a defense position, complete with turrets, armored wall reinforcements and barricades with murder holes – and to a door that had been canvassed with welded armored plates. SteelHooves stopped, raising an armored forehoof and banging it against the door in four impatient raps.

He waited a moment, nickering softly to himself. "SteelHooves, what is this about?" I asked, disquieted by the mood radiating from him. I noticed he was carrying a saddle-satchel that he had never worn before.

He didn't answer, still nickering. Just as I began to suspect he was counting, he stopped. SteelHooves opened the armored door and barged outside, passing a displeased-looking Canterlot Ghoul who stood guard. Calamity and I followed.

I waved to the guard as we passed, observing his battle saddle, armor and the PipBuck on his leg. His broadcaster was turned off; I realized quickly the purpose of SteelHooves' knock. The guard did not return my greeting.

Feeling a wave of depression, I noticed his PipBuck was not part of him. I suspected most of the PipBucks worn by the ghouls of Stable City had been acquired from Stable One or the residents therein. Without the right tools and knowledge, it was impossible to open a PipBuck and lock it onto a new body. However, the PipBuck Technician's stall in Stable One should have had both the tools and the documentation the Canterlot Ghouls needed. I tried to buck up. Feeling morose about my leg wasn't going to help anything. The emotion didn't even make sense.

As we moved forward, I found myself staring out at a wall of pink. We had exited on an upper mezzanine overlooking the atrium. Dim, pink-tinted light flooded the once-grand atrium. The Cloud was thick enough outside that we would need to drink healing potions after making the run between each Ministry building now. Down below, we could hear the sea of static from dozens of broadcasters hidden amongst the skeletons that littered the floor. But we were high enough to be out of danger.

Feeling a flood of déjà vu, I moved up to the railing and looked down. I had been here before. From this very spot, I had looked down into a much sunnier lobby as Applejack spoke openly with her old zebra friend Zecora. I had watched, and my host had plotted Applejack's demise.

I shied away from the railing with a shudder of disgust. SteelHooves was looking back at me from several yards ahead. "This way."

The place our Applejack's Ranger led us to was an odd little alcove underneath a sweeping stairwell. The door had long ago been removed and a simple, stained curtain hung in its place. Warm light poured out from underneath the hanging drapery, as well as above it and along the sides. SteelHooves knocked on the wall beside the curtain, this time almost reverently.

"Star?" he rumbled gently. "It's Applesnack. I've returned with as many of the things you asked for as I could find. And I've brought my friends."

Although I had counted SteelHooves amongst my friends for weeks, to hear him refer to us this way was surprising, strange and poignant.

"Oh bless you," an elderly mare's voice rasped from inside, followed by an odd squeaking. "Please, step inside."

SteelHooves pushed past the curtain without hesitation. With a mixture of caution and wonder, I stepped in behind him.

The room under the stairs was small, lit by a couple old Sparkle-Cola lamps sitting on old metal boxes. There was a clean-looking toilet in the near corner with several pristine coffee mugs sitting on it and a few shelves. The back half of the room was sectioned off by a once-beautiful hanging curtain, originally of rich hues of scarlets and purples, now faded and fraying. Much of the wall directly opposite the doorway was taken up by a rusty ventilation grate, the fan behind it slowly turning. The only other notable furniture amongst the clutter was an ancient phonograph sitting beside a player for more modern audio recordings. I immediately pictured this room as having originally been a little getaway for some janitor or maintenance pony. A place she could sneak off during her shift to smoke, relieve herself or do other things.

Living in this secluded and somewhat sad place, outside of Stable City yet still inside the Ministry building itself, was a mare who had been elderly even before the Pink Cloud made her undying. She was a unicorn, her body fused into the wheelchair to which she had been largely confined even before. My first assumption upon seeing the curtain was that the next "room" held a mattress, but I realized now that not only did Canterlot Ghouls not sleep, but this mare was not even able to lay down and rest.

Still, she greeted us with a smile, her eyes wide and glowing. "Thank you, Applesnack!" She beamed at us. "It has been so long since I've had visitors."

SteelHooves set the saddle-satchel on the floor. "I am sorry that I could not find everything, Star." A violet light manifested around the unicorn ghoul's horn and enveloped the satchel.

"Oh, this is lovely!" Star said, floating out several records and a few audio recordings. "You have saved this old mare, Applesnack. Truly you have." Books levitated out next. "I was going to go insane if I had to read the same dusty old books one more time!"

She gasped as she pulled out a few boxes of old snack cakes. "Oh how thoughtful!" The elderly ghoul's smile was somehow beautiful despite the condition of her decayed and warped body. "I may not need to eat, but it is so wonderful to occasionally taste sweetness."

I looked at SteelHooves. His stance was almost bashful. I could almost feel a warmth radiating off of the normally dour and stoic ghoul.

The elder mare paused, a ghost of a tremble passing though her lower lip. She swiveled away, turning the wheels of her chair with her magic, likewise magically tugging at the curtain to dab at her left eye. The chair squeaked as she rotated. I noticed that the larger wheels were still functional, but the smaller ones had fused rigid. The movement of the curtain revealed the wall behind was plastered with posters and images. I couldn't make any of them out, save that lavender seemed to be the dominating color and one of the posters boasted the word "READ".

As the curtain fell back into place, I realized two things. First, I had no idea why the old ghoul had emotionally reacted to what my mind had labeled a shopping run. And second, she had been unable to wipe away the tear with a hoof because her forelegs were melted into the leg-rests of the chair. I felt an involuntary shudder, trying to imagine living forever unable to move. I immediately wanted to help this poor mare. And I felt very proud of SteelHooves.

"But where are my manners?" Star asked abruptly, turning back with a big smile on her face as she floated the contents of the satchel away. "And where are yours?" she said without a hint of malice. "You haven't introduced your friends."

SteelHooves whinnied. Then turned to look at us. Calamity had been staring at him with eyebrows raised so high they nearly pushed off his hat, but now he broke into an almost smug grin. "Yeah, Applesnack. What say ya introduce us and quit hoggin' this pretty young gal all fer yerself." Calamity shot Star a warm smile and a mirthful wink. She rolled her eyes, smiling.

"Star, this is Littlepip," he said, nodding to me. "And the pegaus is Calamity."

"Littlepip, Calamity, this is Star Sparkle."

"Howdy, Miss Sparkle," Calamity said. My smile of greeting faltered a moment. Wait. Who?

"She's living here, outside Stable City, because she's being shunned," SteelHooves said, his voice carrying an edge. I blinked. Canterlot Ghouls needed neither food nor clothing, and the Ministry hub provided shelter, whether in Stable City or not. But I had learned that ponies need more than these things. Ponies needed companionship and some sort of social framework; and that is what Stable City provided them. As much as water, ponies thirst for friendship.

In shunning Star, the ghouls of Stable City had taken from her the one thing they could, the one thing she probably needed most.

"Because the ghouls of Stable City believe her daughter created the alicorns."

⁂

"…was always proud of my daughter," Star Sparkle told us firmly as she magically drew back the curtain which bisected her humble living space. "And nothing that those monsters outside have done will ever change that."

Twilight Sparkle was behind the curtain. Every inch of wall space was covered in images of her, everything from Ministry posters to ancient and yellowed home photographs (all of which seemed to be of Twilight as a young filly.) There were open scrapbooks of newspaper articles featuring Star Sparkle's daughter. A large oil painting of a smiling Twilight Sparkle hung in a decorative oval frame on the center of the back wall. Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle tchotchkes filled small shelves and crates. And in the center was a precious Twilight Sparkle statuette, her base reading a familiar "Be Smart."

"Golly," Calamity breathed.

"But when the alicorns started appearing in Canterlot and they began killing us, the other ponies of Stable City decided I was no longer welcome among them," Star Sparkle explained sorrowfully. "They said I posed a danger to the city. The alicorns have never paid me unusual attention, but…" She looked away. "Well, maybe they're right."

"Sounds t' me more like they all were lookin' fer somepony t' take it out on," Calamity grumbled.

Star gave Calamity an aching smile. "Please don't judge them too harshly. After all, they have allowed me to still live in the building. I've never been harassed. Maybe once a year, somepony will even bring me things." She smiled warmly at SteelHooves. "Like Applesnack here. Such a sweet young buck."

"You deserve better," SteelHooves asserted.

My heart echoed the sentiment, filling with an aching sadness. But the little pony in my head found the scene in front of me more than a little creepy. Standing beside her daughter in the face of public persecution was admirable, but what I saw before me was more like a shrine. I felt I was looking into the face of obsession.

Star Sparkle seemed to read something in my expression or body language. "Your friend thinks I'm crazy," she told SteelHooves.

I opened my muzzle to protest.

"Don't fret, dear," she said to me kindly. "I understand. It looks like a lot when all of it is in such a small space." I shut my muzzle, sharing a glance with Calamity before lowering my head with an apologetic expression that was not entirely sincere. This would seem excessive even if spread over a multiple rooms twice this size.

Star Sparkle let out a sigh, looking over the Twilight Sparkle shrine. "No, you're right. But it's not what you think." She bit her lower lip. Closed her eyes.

"I loved my daughter. More than life itself. As did my husband." She opened her eyes, looking at the oval oil painting. "And I admired her. The Princess' favorite pupil, the Bearer of one of the Elements of Harmony, the Mare of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. I was so proud." I heard a tremble in her voice. Her gaze lowered to the floor.

"But I was… afraid of her too," Star Sparkle admitted slowly. "We both were, although my husband less than I. Just once, when she was very young, she lost control. She changed me into a potted plant… entirely by accident. If it hadn't been for the Princess…"

The mare who had given birth to Twilight Sparkle looked up at me, her eyes again damp with tears. "I know I shouldn't have been. But I was frightened. And even though I never stopped loving her, I let myself grow distant." She frowned. "Some mother… my daughter received more correspondence from the Princess Herself than she did from me. I never visited her all the time she was in Ponyville. I never met her friends…"

She shook her head. "She never forgot us though. When they built Stable One, my Twilight made sure my husband and I were amongst the first to be guaranteed a place inside. We were on the way there when the Cloud overtook us. My husband died on the steps just outside the Ministry, making sure I made it through the door."

She looked away, softly muttering, "Of course, they'd sealed the Stable early…"

I found myself looking at her wheelchair and thinking of the stallion's skeleton outside with his hooves sunk into the concrete. I was suddenly very angry with the ponies of the Ministry of Wartime Technology. How dare they seal up the Stable, trapping good ponies outside, family and loved ones who the Stable was supposed to save! They deserved… Well, what they got.

"I suppose… I've been trying to make up for all the distance I let fall between us when my daughter was still alive."

I looked at the shrine with fresh eyes. This wasn't obsession. It was overcompensation.

"I come in here and talk to her," Star Sparkle told us. "Sometimes I tell her how my day was, although not so much anymore since all my days are pretty much the same. Sometimes I read to her. She did so love books." Star smiled sadly. "Sometimes, I just tell her I'm sorry. And that I love her." She looked away, a few tears escaping to drip from her cheeks.

"Sometimes," she admitted softly, "I even think that I hear her say something back."

* * *

"We are taking her with us!" SteelHooves stomped.

We were standing on the mezzanine as we waited for Velvet Remedy and Pyrelight to join us.

"We are *not* taking her with us!" I stomped back.

"She deserves better than that," SteelHooves insisted, pointing his hoof in the direction of Star Sparkle's hovel.

"She doesn't deserve to face what we have to," I argued, shaking my head. "Where we're going next is too dangerous…" I was cut off by a majestic hoot as Pyrelight landed on my head, her talons pricking at my scalp through my mane. I turned to see Velvet Remedy trotting up, a rather large package hovering behind her.

SteelHooves nickered angrily. "Well of course we're not taking her with us *now.* The alicorns will be waiting for us right outside. I'm not trying to get her killed."

"Ah might have somethin' t' help with that," Calamity interrupted, pulling the case of new missiles out of his pack and setting it before SteelHooves.

"Oooh?" Velvet Remedy sang, "We're giving presents? Perfect, because I have one for Littlepip!"

I blinked. "A present? For me?"

She floated the package over to me as she joined us. "I just had to get you something new to wear," she chimed. "Especially after throwing your dress to the dragons."

I tried not to grimace. Of all the things I was worried about right now, a pretty dress was really not amongst them. I had rather given up on pretty dresses. The Equestrian Wasteland favored a more rugged and armored look. Still… maybe it would be something to look nice in for Homage?

But when I opened the package, I found that Velvet Remedy had surprised me.

"Canterlot Police Barding," Velvet Remedy told me as I pulled out the old uniform. It was in amazing condition. "Some of the best light barding in Equestria." She whinnied theatrically, "You wouldn't believe how hard it is to find anything practical in your size."

"Wow… I…" I blinked. It was a wonderful gift. Yet at the same time, I had grown rather attached to my armored Stable Utility Barding. (Although, thankfully, not literally and permanently.) Ditzy Doo had armored it, after all.

Velvet Remedy seemed prodded. "Go ahead, put it on." Almost as if she had read my mind, Velvet said, "I know your old Stable suit has been a constant companion, but haven't you put it through enough? That suit has been torn up and mended as often as you have, and deserves a rest. Wouldn't you agree?"

I nodded solemnly and started to disrobe.

"We're still not taking her with us," I said firmly.

"Taking who?" Velvet asked.

"Star Sparkle," SteelHooves told her.

"Who?"

"Take her where?" Calamity asked.

"Tenpony Tower," SteelHooves said emphatically.

"D'ya really think they'll jus' let her, a Canterlot Ghoul, live in that posh, stuck-up…?"

"Yes they will." SteelHooves slowly intoned in a low voice that told me it would be very bad for the citizens of Tenpony Tower to refuse her. "She was *Twilight Sparkle's mother!* Remember what Tenpony Tower is. They will."

I nodded. "I agree," I stated, suspecting that the Twilight Society would go to great lengths to have a direct relative of the Ministry Mare in the Tower. "I'm sure that Homage would help. And…" I chuckled, shaking my head, "I can set her up with a place. I own a cheese shop."

Both Calamity and Velvet Remedy looked at me oddly. “Ya ’ave a what now?”

As I pulled the Stable Utility suit over my head, I informed SteelHooves, “But we’re not taking her with us…”

I tossed my Stable Utility Barding onto the floor and stared at it. It was ragged, so patched up it looked like it was sewn from rags. There were deep stains, not all of which were blood. It was repulsive.

“…not now.” I looked to SteelHooves, who was still snorting impatiently. “We’ll come back for her though. I promise. Until then, she’s safe here.”

“Why not?” SteelHooves asked insistently.

“Because we’re not going to Tenpony Tower. As soon as we’re done in Canterlot, we’re going straight to Splendid Valley…” No more delays.

“After we pick up Xenith,” Calamity reminded me. Okay, one delay.

“…After we pick up Xenith,” I added. “Splendid Valley.” I leveled a look at SteelHooves. “You know what’s there. I’m not taking Twilight Sparkle’s *mother* anywhere near that place. I am not taking her *anywhere* until the Goddess has been dealt with.”

SteelHooves seemed to accept that answer, backing down with a nod.

I folded the barding up as best the armor plates would allow and slipped it into the duffle bag filled with tools for Calamity. “Oh!” I looked up, floating my old armor and the StealthBuck II out of the duffle bag before passing it to Calamity. “I’ve got a present for you too.”

Calamity took one look inside and let out a whinnying squeal of glee.

I started putting on the Canterlot Police Barding, which really did fit quite well and… oh, what was that feeling? Oh yes! I remember now: it’s the feeling of wearing something clean!

SteelHooves walked over to the nearest Stable City guard and spoke with him, getting a nod.

I trotted in place, getting used to the feeling of the new armored barding. “Thank you, Velvet! This is… nice!” I paused, noting the color. “How does it look? Does it go with my mane?”

SteelHooves neighed, returning as the guard trotted over to the railing of the mezzanine. “Honest opinion? I can’t picture it on you. Not enough bloodstains.”

I gave SteelHooves a dirty look.

“Give her time”

I shifted my attention to the guard, ignoring them both. The guard’s horn began to glow. Sparks of magical light floated down and spread about the skeleton-covered floor below.

The static from beneath us stopped.

“How…?”

“I shut them off,” the guard said simple. “I’ll turn the broadcasters back on after you leave.”

Shut them off? My hoof slapped my face as I remembered cowering in a corner in the Ministry of Magic lab, shooting frantically at a broadcaster. Of course you could just turn them off.

I was not a clever pony. I was, in fact, a very stupid pony.

As we walked down the steps and made our way through the sea of bones, I stopped and pulled one of the broadcasters from its PipBuck, turning it over, familiarizing myself with its design.

“Well, ain’t this obviously an ambush,” Calamity said dryly, looking out into the pink. “Where d’ya think they all went?” There was no sign outside of even a single alicorn. “Hidin’ up on the roof or ’round the side o’ the buildin’?”

“Maybe the one they called Nightseer got tired of losing alicorns to us and called them back?” Velvet Remedy suggested hopefully. Something in the tone of her voice betrayed that she didn’t really think that was possible either.

“So,” Calamity looked to me, “What’s the plan?”

* * *

The Balloon Orb

Pinkie Pie’s office. Ministry of Morale. Manehattan.

Only… not.

As I pushed open the door with a pink hoof, everything seemed off. Distorted. It was as if the normal color scheme of the world had become a twisted painting of grotesque pastels.

I felt awful, and yet I felt horribly alive. A buzz ran through my nerves and up my spine. My ears itched. There was a tremor in the back of my right hindleg and an odd burning sensation was growing in my left forehoof.

I knew this feeling. My host was riding the razor cliff of a Party-Time Mint-als high. The edge before the awful crash. But it was more than that. This was… wrong.

The world tasted funny. Smelled funny. Like peppermint and rotted cabbage.

“Stupid, bitchy-witchy Twilight. I’m *fine!* I’ll show her…” My host looked around, scowling. It was as if even she realized something was terribly out of place, but couldn’t put her hoof on what.

“…I know. I’ll record my memory and send it to her. A nice long one. She’ll see there is nothing wrong with me. And she won’t be able to leave until she’s *done* seeing…”

No. No Pinkie. You are not fine. Nothing about this is fine.

“Pfft, leave her be,” a voice whispered from beside me. “If she wants to throw you away because she doesn’t like your parties anymore, then good riddance!” The voice was female and it was coming from… the plant? Yes, one of the potted plants in Pinkie Pie’s room was actually talking to her. I saw the plant move, the leaves rustle as the voice drifted up from it. “You don’t need her. You don’t need any of them!”

My host barely gave her… it… a glance. “I thought she was my friend.”

“Indeed,” came another voice from a marbled paperweight on Pinkie Pie’s desk. “None of them see what you can see. They don’t understand the pressure you’re under.”

“No,” Pinkie Pie agreed. “No, they don’t.”

Oh Goddesses. Pinkie Pie was having a mental break. I was seeing what she was seeing in her head.

Pinkie Pie continued to look around, then stopped, staring at a tall, thin object concealed by a sheet. "Where did you come from?" She plodded over and grasped the sheet in her teeth, pulling it free.

Before her stood a mirror. I saw my host staring back at me. Pinkie Pie, but not as I was used to seeing her. Her coat's color was off. Her mane hung straight and limp. Her expression was cross and dour. This was Pinkie Pie right after her last party.

There was a ribbon wrapped around the mirror with a note on it:

Dearest Pinkie,

Thought this might help you find your way.

~Rarity.

Pinkie Pie scowled as she read the note. "I'm. Not. Lost." She grasped the ribbon in her teeth and tore it away. Then stared at herself in the mirror.

"You too, Rarity?" she mumbled. "Are *all* my friends going to abandon me?"

"Can't trust anypony anymore," the paperweight grumbled.

Pinkie Pie trotted to a nearby intercom, pressing her hoof against a button. "Hey. There's a mirror in my office that isn't supposed to be here. Call somepony to pick it up."

"Yes ma'am," a mare's voice crackled over the intercom, sounding oddly distant. "Where is it supposed to be?"

"I don't care. Take it to one of the FunFarms or something," Pinkie grumbled. "Just get rid of it!"

My host trotted backup to the mirror, staring. She reached out a hoof, touching the surface…

…and jumped back at the shock of cold. The image in the mirror changed abruptly. Now, looking back at us, was Pinkie Pie. Smiling, cheery, objectionably pink, poofy-haired Pinkie Pie.

"Oh! Hey!" the Pinkie Pie in the mirror called out happily. "Hello, Pinkamina! Ooh, you don't look so good. Which is bad because you're me, and that means I don't look so good!"

She had enchanted a small mirror. To look in it, you would see your reflection, just as with any mirror. But if you touched it, or focused your magic on it, then a spell within the mirror… took a picture of your soul. Then a second enchantment allowed the mirror to show that image.

The mirror Pinkie Pie looked at my host with concern. "What's wrong with us?"

"Who the hell are you?" Pinkie Pie, my host, grumbled.

Goddesses, this was bizarre, if not downright creepy. I decided to think of them in different names just to keep my thoughts straight. Although part of me worried that was buying into this insanity.

"Why, I'm you, of course!" Pinkie Pie giggled. "I'm the real you… Which is weird, since I'm totally high too." The reflection was high on PTMs? Or was that Pinkamina's high warping… the reflection that can't really be having this conversation in the first place since reflections. Can't. Talk! Just like paperweights and potted plants!

"This is a trick," Pinkamina hissed.

"You mean like a practical joke? See, they really do still care about you." Pinkie Pie paused. Then brightened. "Oh! Hello, Littlepip."

Uh… hello? The conversation had taken a left turn into weirdsville.

"Littlepip says 'uh, hello'." Pinkie Pie proclaimed, beaming.

Wait. What?

"Now Littlepip says 'wait, what?'" Pinkie Pie giggled.

This was impossible!

"You remind me of our friend Twilight Sparkle, Littlepip!"

"She's not our friend," Pinkamina sighed. "Not anymore."

Pinkie Pie's eyes widened. "She is SO our friend. If she wasn't, she wouldn't be trying to help us!" Pinkamina opened her mouth but Pinkie Pie shook her head. "And don't try telling yourself you don't need help. I know better. And that means you know better."

"I… I'm just trying to make ponies happy."

Make them happy?

"Littlepip has a point," Pinkie Pie said seriously. "You can't make somepony happy. You can only help them find happiness." Pinkie Pie pointed at the window. "Look out there. Do they *look* happy?"

"No," Pinkamina mumbled, looking anyplace but the window.

"They're not happy," Pinkie Pie admitted sadly. "I think… I think they're actually… scared of us."

This was… this was what led to Pinkie Pie realizing she needed help. This conversation, that somehow, insanely, I was a part of, was what pushed Pinkie to…

"Shussssh!" Pinkie Pie scowled at me from the mirror. "You have to keep secrets, Littlepip!"

What? No! If… if there was any chance that I was somehow… communicating… then there were things that Pinkie Pie needed to know! I could warn her! I could save…

"Nooooooot list-en-ing!" Pinkie Pie said, covering her ears theatrically. "You. Can't. Tell. Littlepip!"

But… but everything ends so horribly!

"No. No it doesn't." Pinkie Pie shook her head fervently. Then, suddenly, she was smiling again. "Everything will end in sunshine and rainbows!" she announced gleefully. I was struck by the strangest sense of déjà vu.

She pointed a hoof at me, or was it at Pinkamina. "As long as you're willing to face the fire, that is."

"What fire?" Pinkamina asked.

"Don't listen to her!" the potted plant insisted. "She just wants you to fail."

"No," Pinkie Pie insisted. "We have to do what is most important first. We have to save the other ponies before we save ourselves. You know what I mean, with those bad, bad ponies at Four Stars. But then…" Pinkie Pie smiled sadly. "Then we do have to save us, don't we?"

Sunshine and rainbows. I wanted to tell her how absolutely impossible that was. Hell, the two things this world didn't have anymore were…

Pinkie Pie grew very cross, glaring at me through the mirror. "Sunshine. And. Rainbows."

Pinkamina dropped to the carpet. "We… I…" She began to cry. "How? How can I fix this? How can I giggle at the ghostie when *I'm* the ghostie?"

If a hug could heal pain, then laughter could heal fear. But the Ministries cast a big shadow. There were many, many ponies who needed to giggle.

"We need to stop," Pinkie Pie said solemnly. "The whole Ministry of Morale isn't helping. It's hurting ponies, and we need to stop.

"We need to get clean. Then record this memory for Littlepip. Then…"

"The whole Ministry," Pinkamina moaned. "We need to tear it all down. A big going away party. The biggest ever."

* * *

Ahead of us loomed a tall, curving building of feminine grace, adorned with large gemstones and crystalline latticework. If the Ministry of Wartime Technology building was the king of Ministry Walk, the Ministry of Image was clearly the queen. Everywhere else, Ministry of Image preferred to keep itself invisible, a shadowy hoof supporting all the others from behind the scenes. The Canterlot Hub of the Ministry was a showpiece, the name of the Ministry wrapping around the façade in diamond-studded letters.

Rarity, the Mare of the Ministry, had never appeared in any publication, poster or product of the Ministry of Image. Here, she stood proudly before her Ministry as an alabaster statue lording over a fountain of crystal, glass and diamond dust.

My plan, which had largely amounted to "run", seemed to be working. Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves galloped beside me as we passed between the dead trees that lined the park. My lungs were burning, fighting for breath. My head pounded and my vision blurred. I could feel the strain on my heart and muscles as the Pink Cloud attacked every part of my body, inside and out.

Still no harassment from our enemies, but I had two red lights on my E.F.S. compass. "Look sharp!" SteelHooves called out, his visor giving him the same warning. I didn't see anypony; either they were invisible or they were hiding in the draped alcoves of the Ministry. Calamity beat his wings, soaring upwards, wary of alicorns on the roof.

It all happened in less than three seconds.

We charged around the Rarity Fountain and right into the trap.

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP!

Proximity mines! A *lot* of them, many of which were magical energy based, virtually paved the space between Rarity and the front door of the Ministry of Image. Many of them had already begun to flash as Velvet Remedy and SteelHooves drew to a stop next to me. My horn was already glowing as a field of levitation magic swept over the mines.

The two alicorns stepped out of their hiding places and sat down, becoming statues as they instantly erected an alicorn shield around us, trapping us inside it with the mines. Pyrelight, who had been keeping pace with us, smacked into the inside of the shield and fell to the ground amongst the mines, dazed.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!
BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

I parted the sea of beeping mines, shoving them into piles against the shield right next to the alicorns as I magically switched on the broadcaster which I had attached to my PipBuck. Velvet Remedy telekinetically pulled Pyrelight back and wrapped us in her own magical shield.

My head exploded in agony. My vision swam with red. Beside me, Velvet Remedy started to scream as the broadcaster's deadly necromancy attacked her as she held the spell. The alicorns jerked, opening their muzzles in a twisted cry of anguish, their shield dissolving.

The mines exploded in a cavalcade of fire, shrapnel, concussive force and magical energy.

* * *

BLAM! BLAM!

The turret exploded as Little Macintosh sent two armor-piercing bullets through its innards. A twin-shot from Calamity's battle saddle took out the last of the six security turrets. Compared to the security systems we had run into in other buildings, this had been almost too easy.

I stumbled into a plush bench, face-planting into the cushions, and caught my breath. The others settled down, imbibing healing potions. The Pink Cloud had harmed us more than the alicorns' trap and the turrets combined.

I could smell something foul from the cushion, but I didn't care. Even at a glance, I could see that much of the Ministry of Image was succumbing to rot and decay. The furnishings and décor had been chosen for appearance, not longevity.

"This don't bode well," Calamity said with a grimace. I looked up wearily, pulling out a healing potion of my own. Shoving myself away from the blissful cushion-ness of the bench, I moved to where he was flying. Calamity was looking behind the lobby greeting counter.

Steel Rangers. Dead. More than half a dozen of them.

"Sent by Cottage Cheese to retrieve the Black Book," SteelHooves noted solemnly, joining us.

"Ayep. But… what killed 'em? And who laid them out like this?"

I shook my head. Not a good sign indeed. I turned away, tipping the potion and letting its healing liquid pour down my tongue and throat. Calamity was flying over the bodies, pulling ammunition from their battle saddles.

Velvet Remedy was looking over the Image Directory hanging on a wall between two columns of twisting marble. "Where were we expecting to find this book?" Velvet questioned.

"Rarity's desk. A secret safe in her office."

Velvet nodded. "There's an executive elevator. For once, we might actually be in and out as quickly as Littlepip keeps hoping."

Calamity coughed into his hoof. A cough that sounded a lot like a comment about "liking mares".

Rolling my eyes, I checked the map and started towards the elevator. It was just down the right-hoof hall and around the corner. The hall was hung with backlit posters in gilded frames, each boasting the merits of the other Ministries.

I pulled up short as I rounded the corner.

The executive elevator was between two "PROGRESS" posters, one of which was the familiar image of the glee-filled mare and her hover robot, the other a group of ponies staring in awe at a glowing terminal. The elevator itself was richly designed, gilded with gold, and stuck open by the dead body of a Steel Ranger knight. The body of a scribe lay crumpled inside, slowly rotting. Her horn and the top of her skull had exploded, painting the back of the elevator car. Soft static poured out of the speaker on the roof of the elevator car.

"Maybe we shouldn't take the elevator?" Velvet suggested as she caught up with me.

* * *

As we wove through the maze of terminals, monitors and meeting tables that seemed to make up a large bulk of *Media Oversight,* I was struck by the lack of skeletons or other signs of dead ponies. Not just in the Ministry of Image, but in the Ministries of Peace and Arcane Sciences as well. Perhaps it was the sight in the Ministry of Wartime Technology's atrium that had reminded me that something was missing. The only dead here were Steel Rangers. Other than one message written in blood, there was no indication of pony death in Twilight's Ministry either.

The lighting in the room flickered on the verge of giving out. When we had switched them on, two of the light fixtures had exploded.

SteelHooves paused, looking at a line of dust-covered maneframes along one side of the building. "This room alone could have killed them," he commented. "Just by seeing all the technology preserved here and knowing they were only here for a book."

I glanced at a nearby terminal, this one still glowing. Curious, I drew out my hacking tool. It was an extremely easy terminal to access. The password was "glitter".

Media Oversight, Intraoffice Memo #057

Just a reminder and clarification for ponies new to Media Oversight's division of Imagery:

All pictures of ponies including multiple, non-specific individuals are required to have at least a two-to-one ratio of ponies with bold or pastel palettes to ponies whose coat and mane bear neutral colors such as brown, grey or tan. A three-to-one ratio is preferable. The only exception to this is for ponies with white coats. White is Celestia's color and is always permissible in any amount.

Likewise, be sure that any planned photography be coordinated with at least one of Imagery's pegasi. We want the image of Equestria to be one of glorious sunny days and bright starry nights. Overcast skies are to be strictly avoided unless required for Effect. Color correction may be employed to make the sky over Equestria an even deeper blue.

In addition, remember that all images of zebras are to be monochromatic. Color photography should be rendered black and white or passed through a desaturation and palette correction spell. Attached is a list of appropriate tints for zebra imagery, but a good rule of hoof is any coloration that gives the image a demonic or sickly appearance.

Personal Memo:

Dearest Shutterbright,

While I do appreciate your artistic thinking, and I agree that a "bright and beautiful" Equestria is a most desirable aesthetic, I must decline your proposal that all imagery of Equestria display a sunny day. Please remember that Princess Luna sits on the throne now. Let us not set policy designed to wound Her.

Sincerely,
~Rarity

Media Oversight, Intraoffice Memo #162

All ponies with Media Oversight are required to attend the mandatory employee meeting tomorrow, starting promptly at eight. In this meeting, we will be giving you an overview of our new Radio Override System. Thanks to assistance from the Ministry of Awesome, we have been able to establish an Equestria-wide system for emergency interruption or enhancement of radio broadcasts. All ponies in Media Oversight will need to be familiar with the basics of this new system and how to access the ROS from either the Media Oversight office or the Base Station of any of the MAw Towers.

The meeting is expected to last two hours. Lemon cakes and tea will be served.

"Uh, Li'lpip?" Calamity said, staring at a dead monitor. Across it, somepony had painted a message:

THEY EAT YOUR SOUL!

"C'n we just go home now?" the pegasus moaned. I didn't blame him.

We continued on, even more alert and cautious than before.

* * *

"A dragon!?" Velvet Remedy gasped, echoing my own sentiment. Pyrelight let out a worried hoot.

"Ayep," Calamity asserted as he flew over the book bins and tables of *Restricted Publications*. The rest of us had to walk around them. From what I could discern, the very long table I was passing had once been where a small legion of unicorns had magically converted books to "new editions". There were bins for books beside each workstation, one labeled "inappropriate" and the other labeled "corrected".

A poster on a nearby bookcase showed a dark-blue earth pony reading over a book, with more stacked on each side. The poster read: "Be diligent. We check your work." We had passed through the book review office to get to this room.

"That makes this much more difficult," SteelHooves commented. "I do not believe we have the firepower to kill a dragon of that age."

Velvet Remedy frowned. "You ponies do realize this is probably Spike's mother we are talking about, right?" She nickered, "Show a little compassion."

I winced. But right now, she was a threat to Equestria – a giant, living Pink Cloud factory.

"Ah don't think we 'ave to," Calamity stated. "Kill her, Ah mean. The crazy alicorn lady already solved the problem fer us."

"She's already dead?" I exclaimed in surprise.

Calamity shook his head. "Seems that the alicorn got 'hold of a spell that'll turn big mother dragon inta something small that doesn't breathe Cloud… or, at least, that would only breathe tiny puffs of cloud. A field mouse, Ah think."

Velvet Remedy stopped, staring. "A spell that turns a dragon into a field mouse?"

"Ayep."

"And how do we cast this spell?" she queried. "I'm pretty sure it's outside of my scope of spellcraft, and we know it's outside of Littlepip's." Rub it in, why don't you.

I'm the one who found the spell, the not-Trixie personality had said. *I'm the one who cast it.*

"Taken care of," Calamity grinned. "Crazy alicorn lady already cast the spell. Well, sorta."

"Sort of?" Velvet prompted. I wasn't sure if she was asking what he meant or correcting his grammar. Calamity assumed the former.

"Way Ah hear it, she used somethin' that the Ministry o' Magic came up with fer the Ministry o' Morale. A way t' cast a spell and hold the effect on a trigger," Calamity rubbed a hoof against the back of his neck. "T' be precise, a way t' cast a spell inta a present. The spell goes off when the present is opened. She hadda quirky name for it."

"Spell in a Box," I guessed.

"Ayep," Calamity said as he landed next to a set of cages labeled *Sanitation.* "That was it."

I ducked under the table between us and trotted up to him, glancing at the clipboard which hung next to the cages. "For processing of dangerously seditious materials. Please read instructions carefully." From what I read, the empty cages once held trained parasprites which had been ensorcelled to eat the words off of pages. I wondered if they only ate specific words, or if they rendered the whole book blank (and thus gloriously sedition-free).

"Makes sense," I thought aloud. "With the thickness of Pink Cloud down there, she probably couldn't actually approach the dragon and cast the spell herself. So she had to cast it into a Spell in the Box. I wonder how she got it down there to mother though."

"She made a deal with a couple of the Canterlot Dragons," Calamity said.

"Oh dear," Velvet said. "No wonder her personalities were in crisis. She really was on the verge of rendering half of herself obsolete!"

"How do you know all this?" SteelHooves asked.

"All. Fucking. Night."

"I take it the present hasn't been opened yet?" I looked to Calamity expectantly. "So that's what we have to do?" That would mean sending SteelHooves into the treasury. There wasn't another of us who could survive it. "Open her present without getting transfigured into a field mouse?"

"Not… exactly."

* * *

"What?!" I stared at Calamity in disbelief.

We had gone up a level and were working our way through the brightly-colored *Educational Reform* floor as Calamity explained the plan that the alicorn in the Ministry of Arcane Sciences basement had devised. When Calamity was finished, I felt all reason had fled from the world.

"Who the hell ties something this important to the start of a gala?" I huffed. "That's insane!"

Calamity fixed me with a level stare. Behind him was a poster of happy foals playing in a cheerful-looking schoolyard under the arch of a rainbow. "What part o' what ya saw down in that basement screamed *sanity* t' ya?"

I groaned, pressing a hoof to my face. "Okay, okay… let me see if I've got this. In order to stop the continuous replenishment of the Pink Cloud, we have to trigger a Spell in the Box that will turn the treasury dragon into a field mouse. The trigger for the Spell in the Box has been rigged into the fireworks display for the Grand Galloping Gala…"

I remembered Pinkie Pie's endorsement on the Fillydelphia FunFarm poster in SteelHooves' shack: *Everything the Grand Galloping Gala should have been. Every day, forever!*

In Equestria's final year, Princess Luna had given over the Grand Galloping Gala to Pinkie Pie. The fireworks had been rigged up with one of her "instant party" systems. But the Gala had never happened. The megaspells rained down and life in Canterlot had ended. No more parties.

"…And the trigger to set off the fireworks is in Princess Luna's private chambers in the royal castle?" I understood now why Calamity had said we needed to go to the castle. I was so frustrated I could just scream. Why wasn't anything ever easy?

"How would we know if it worked?" Velvet Remedy asked. Asking SteelHooves to wander into a dragon's lair and check had clearly never crossed her mind.

Calamity pulled something out of his pack and spit it onto his hoof. "With this!" He held up a large, pink gemstone with a flaw deep within it, an artificial flaw in the shape of a rune. "Spell in the Box goes off, this little darlin' lights up."

I wondered if this was the "it" that the alicorn had been searching for.

"You stole that on our way out of the basement, didn't you?" Velvet asked rhetorically.

A blob of red light appeared on the edge of my E.F.S. compass. I spun, trying to spot the source. My ears perked, catching a low, unearthly hum. It sounded similar to the warping, grating sound of a Canterlot Ghoul reviving, only softer and caught on a single note like a broken recording.

But there was nothing there. Just a short, colorful bookshelf carved and painted with hearts and rainbows and prancing pony children. The bookshelf contained equally colorful books. The paint was peeling now, and two of the shelves had rotted through, spilling their contents onto the floor. Above was a chalkboard with a story problem:

> *In Sunshine's home town of Ponyville, the reward for turning in zebra sympathizers is 500 bits. Sunshine reported her bad uncle yesterday, two zebra sympathizers today, and will report another tomorrow. If half of the ponies she reported are proven to be zebra sympathizers, how many bits will she receive at the end of the week?*

A dark shadow formed on the blackboard. Then bulged, pressing through it, a shadowy cloud that reached through the wall like a grasping claw.

I froze, trying to process what I was seeing. The shadow cloud grew, moving towards us, splitting into multiple flowing tendrils. The unhallowed hum was coming from it, growing louder. The lights began to dim, like the thing was devouring the illumination in the room. One tendril curled down, passing through a desk, totally insubstantial. The tail of it pulled out of the chalkboard, the thing fully in the room with us.

I tried to kick on S.A.T.S., but my targeting spell faltered, unable to lock on.

Whooooooosh! The rocket from SteelHooves' battle saddle arrowed past me, moving through the shadow cloud as if was really just a shadow. The rocket struck the far wall in a loud explosion of fire, dust and colorful debris. The blowback knocked me down, toppled bookshelves, threw a table. The shadowy cloud barely reacted, its tendrils still reaching out towards each of us.

I skittered back, away from the snaking shadow, certain of what would happen if it touched me. *They eat your soul!* Our weapons were useless against this creature. No armor would stop it. I was no longer surprised that all the Steel Rangers who made it this far had perished here.

Velvet Remedy cast her shield, wrapping the shadow cloud in her magic. It pressed its tendrils against the wall of the shield, the shadow molding over the surface, unable to get through.

Velvet Remedy had contained it. No… them! The shadow was a swarm of tiny, jet-black necrosprites. *They could pass through solid objects, but not through magic fields.* I shuddered, shakily releasing a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

"I'll keep them contained," Velvet said. "You go on ahead."

Pyrelight landed on her rump, looking insistent on staying. We nodded and ran off, leaving her holding the swarm.

The Book was here. In this room. I could *feel* it.

I had been in Rarity's personal office before. It was much the same, although gnawed on by the teeth of time. A dress pony stood in one corner next to an ornate chest. There was a note attached to the chest, written in Rarity's elegant script.

> *Thoughts on the dress:*
>
> *The goal is to create elegant yet functional armor of a moderate weight and classic style. I've chosen a color scheme of amaranth and gold that harkens back to the dress that my beloved friends created for me for that first Gala so long ago. In honor of my*

> *dearest and closest friend, I am drawing on my best skills at haute couture. The armored plating, particularly over the breast, will draw inspiration from the armor worn by the royal guards.*
>
> *I have woven a little magic into the dress. Although only the metal plating will stop bullets, cloth should hold well up against bladed weapons, as well as being resistant to the wear and tear and general dirtying that I have come to expect from a battlefield or a Gala. (I jested that I might make the final version indestructible, but it was only a joke. I did, after all, tell Applejack that I would do no such thing. And besides, the reaction from my top magician would have been enough to put me off the idea even if I had been serious. He was right, of course. With what I have done, I most likely do not have enough of a soul left to spare even a little of it.)*
>
> *Anyway, I am very pleased with my first pass. But the final dress needs to be even better, beyond mere perfection. The Grand Galloping Gala is still months away, so even with all the insanity here, I do have plenty of time. It is my most sincere hope that most, if not all, of my friends will be at the event this year. If so, I hope to convince them to allow me the honor of fashioning each one of them a similar-yet-unique, elegant "Ministry Mare" armored dress.*
>
> *Normally, the Gala would not be the venue I would choose to show off the first in what I hope will be a new line of fashionable armor. But this year, Pinkie Pie is finally living her dream and has been put in charge of the event. So really, all bets are off.*

I floated out my screwdriver and a bobby pin, picking the lock on the chest with relative ease. Opening it, I laid eyes on the armored dress. It was… beautiful.

"Ah thought ya said the book was in the desk?" Calamity said, flying up from behind me. "Whoa nelly!"

"Yeah," I whispered, pulling the armored dress out and looking it over.

"Uh… Li'lpip?" Calamity said timidly. "Could… uh… could Ah have that?"

"I didn't know you liked to wear dresses," SteelHooves intoned as he joined us.

Calamity spun around in the air. "Ah don't!" he insisted. "It's fer *Velvet.*"

I snickered as SteelHooves neighed mockingly. "Of course you can, Calamity. She'll look… exquisite in it!"

I passed the dress to Calamity and moved to the desk. I closed my eyes, drawing on the memory of how Rarity had opened the secret compartment. One of the gems embedded in the front of the desk concealed the lock.

Opening my eyes, I extended my magic over the desk, moving aside the gem. I began to pick the lock, this time using just my magic. The lock was deceptively easy to pick, almost like the compartment wanted to be opened.

I slid open the hidden compartment. There, laying amongst the papers and detritus like a sleeping dragon, was the dark tome – perfectly preserved, its ancient pages filled with the most powerful and forbidden magic between covers of the blackest leather.

I reached out with my magic. I felt a cold shock as I touched it with my meager ability, the book promising to unlock greater powers and mysteries than I ever dreamed of. I didn't have to be a one-trick unicorn anymore. With this Book, I could be *Magic* if I wanted to, powerful enough that I was worthy of being a Bearer of that Element.

It was mine!

Velvet Remedy made her way to us slowly. Her horn was still glowing and beads of sweat fell down her forehead. She was pouring most of her concentration into maintaining her shield even though it was out of sight. Once we were outside, she would release it. The necrosprite swarm hadn't left the Ministry building in over two centuries. We were hoping it wouldn't now. I gave equal odds that either the magic woven into the Ministry walls that kept the Pink Cloud out also kept the swarm inside, or that the swarm had remained here, drawn to the presence of the Black Book like moths to a lantern.

I turned to stare at the pony-sized poster on the wall. I had seen it before on a massive billboard in Manehattan. I hadn't liked it much then. I liked it less now that I actually knew a zebra.

Ponies love laughter. Zebras do not understand joy and fear it.
Ponies are honest. Zebras tell only lies.
Ponies are loyal. Zebras will knife you in the back.
Ponies are generous. Zebras are selfish and greedy.
Ponies care about each other. Zebras care only about themselves.

"Okay, here's the plan," I said, knowing the others would not like this. "Everypony else runs to the Ministry of Awesome. I'm going to slip into the royal castle and set off the Gala fireworks."

"Alone?"

"Yer gonna what now?"

"Not a chance!"

The responses I expected.

"No, Li'lpip!" Calamity said as he swooped close to me, backing me against a wall. "Ah should do this. Ah'm faster. Ah'm more maneuverable. And Ah called it. This is muh mission."

I slipped out the MG StealthBuck II and floated it before them. "I can get in undetected. But it has to be me. Just me." I was the only one with a PipBuck. There was no room for discussion.

"Pony feathers," Calamity spit, bucking his hoof through the pony-sized poster.

"If you find the Goddesses," Velvet Remedy said slowly, still concentrating.

I frowned. I didn't want to find the Princesses. My mind conjured nightmare images of Their skeletons fused together in the throne room and my heart stopped. Just for a moment. I wasn't sure I could handle finding Them, seeing where They died.

I certainly didn't want Velvet Remedy to bear witness to such a devastating horror. "If I find the bodies of the Princesses, that won't mean I've found the Goddesses. They're transcendent souls."

I ignored Calamity's snort.

"But you will tell me what you find," Velvet Remedy insisted. I really didn't want to. "Promise me."

I only nodded, feeling a tear form in my eye. I prayed to the Goddesses that I wouldn't have to either honor that promise or break it. I begged them silently that I would find nothing.

Calamity flew up to me again, this time with the pink gem in his teeth. He tossed it to me. “Now ya gotta promise me somethin’,” he said softly. “Ya gotta promise me yer gonna do this. See it through.” I looked at him with surprise. I quickly nodded. Of course I would!

“Ah’m serious, Li’lpip. Ah really want it t’ be me,” he lowered his head, looking ashamed. “I know it in muh heart, but muh head needs convincin’ that we’re still the good guys. Ah need this.”

I floated up the pink gem with its rune flaw. “Then maybe you should hold this,” I offered. “That way, you’ll know when its done.”

Calamity shook his head. “As much as Ah’d love t’, y’all might need it. Without it, how else will ya know its worked an’ y’all can come back?” He looked away. “No way Ah’m gonna leave ya hangin’ just t’ satisfy muhself.”

I nodded again and tucked the gemstone away. Calamity flew ahead silently.

We moved into the stairwell and descended. The Black Book radiated an unpleasant coolness through one of my saddlebags. I was beginning to question whether I was really intending to give this to Trixie. Maybe my plan, whatever it was, needed revision. Or maybe there was something inside the book that would take care of Trixie once and for all.

What was it that Rarity told Applejack that the Black Book contained? *Magic to tear souls apart.*

Maybe… maybe I could even save Twilight Sparkle!

* * *

“Arrrrrrugh!”

I hurled the Black Book against one of the pillars in the royal throne room. I floated out another healing potion and downed the contents, hoping it would relieve the pounding in my head and the tightness in my chest.

The royal castle was filled with Pink Cloud, thicker than outside. It had rotted away the tapestries, turned the carpets and draperies into greasy residue, cracked and discolored the stained glass, and decayed the once royal furniture into collapsed heaps of debris. The golden fountain pools at the foot of the royal throne were tarnished beyond polishing and stagnant with thick pink sludge.

At least there were no bones in here. No skeletons of Celestia and Luna.

I knew I shouldn’t have paused. I needed to keep moving. If I dallied, the pink would kill me. Or the StealthBuck II would die and the alicorns would kill me.

But still, I had stopped, my curiosity strangling me, threatening to kill me with razor claws if I didn’t at least look inside the Book. Just a peek. I had stopped, telling myself I would just crack the cover open. That I was just making sure that parasprites hadn’t eaten the words off the pages.

The Black Book was written in archaic zebra glyphs. Every damn page. The book wanted me to read it. I was sure if I studied it, the answers would come to me in dreams. But that didn’t help me now. The little pony in my head was throwing a tantrum.

Red lights moved about on my E.F.S. compass. I clamped my muzzle closed, biting my lower lip. Stupid, stupid, stupid! I dashed over, retrieving the book, shivering at the frosty surge I felt from it whenever I touched it with my magic.

Two alicorns stepped into the throne room, their shields up. As far as I could tell, the alicorns in the castle never dropped their shields. They seemed more resistant to the Pink Cloud, but they were not immune. And with the Cloud's concentration here, they were limiting their exposure.

I crouched behind the throne, hiding even though I was invisible.

I could feel the Cloud eating at my insides, gnawing at my muscles, clamping down on my lungs and heart, seeping into my bowels. I already wanted another healing potion, but I had to hold off or I would run out. Princess Luna's private chambers couldn't be far. I could probably make it in a short gallop if these two would just leave. Or at least move so their shields weren't blocking the Celestia-damned doorway.

"I don't see anything," one said, turning to her companion. "But I *feel* something. The room feels colder than it was before."

What the hell? Was the Black Book a damn refrigerator? No, that made no sense. The safe it was in would have been freezing. Was the alicorn sensing something metaphysical? I suddenly wondered how Pinkie Pie would have responded to the proximity of the Black Book.

"I feel nothing different," the other said, at least partially confirming my suspicions. "We should inform Nightseer. She will know what to make of your sensitivity." The alicorns took one last look around. One of them walked up to the throne, tilting her head and looking straight at me. Through me.

"There is nothing here," she said, turning back and rejoining her sister.

"We go."

* * *

The door to Princess Luna's chambers was sealed with a lock almost identical to the one which had secured Princess Celestia's room back in Her school. A very tricky lock, but familiarity helped me open it swiftly.

I pushed open the door with a hoof and stepped swiftly away as thick Pink Cloud rolled out into the hallway. The Cloud was pooled here in lethal concentrations. I could barely make out the ceiling (which I noticed formed a once-beautiful mosaic of a light blue sky with wisps of clouds and a cheery sun); I couldn't make out the far wall at all.

I floated out a healing potion, drinking it. I felt it repairing my heart and lungs, taking the edge off the thudding in my head. My stomach settled. I took a deep breath.

I charged into the room, my horn glowing to provide light. I was looking for the pressure switch for the Gala. Immediately, my heart tried to seize, my lungs lost their cache of air as I began to choke. I felt like a thousand tiny spiders had hatched in my intestines and were spreading throughout my insides.

I found her bed, closet, dressers… but I didn't see the switch! I dashed for the doorway as those spiders started to bite and sting.

I slammed the door closed behind me, pulling out two healing potions and downing them. As my mind cleared, I realized I had only one healing potion left, plus a super restoration potion.

And I needed to make at least one more run through the room.

I nudged open the door, stepping back again. I lowered myself, preparing to run.

A spot of red appeared on my E.F.S. compass. I moaned, shaking. I hoped the invisibility spell would hold out. The last thing I wanted right now was a fight.

"Come out, come out, my little pony!"

The alicorn's majestic voice rang in my head as well as my ears. I turned and watched as she ascended the staircase behind me and stepped into the room with me. She was one of the forest green alicorns, but her coat was so dark it appeared sheer ebony. Her mane and tail flowed behind her like plasma, rippling in a non-existent wind. She wore armor made of bones, a saddle fashioned from a pony's ribcage, with wing bones splayed out across her own. From her neck hung a pony's skull with an exceptionally long, slender horn.

Thick wisps of pooled Pink Cloud rolled along the floor from Princess Luna's chambers behind me, curling around my hooves. I felt myself trembling.

The alicorn stopped, looking right at me, then looked about the rest of the room. Her horn glowed as she slid a small knife out of her armor. The knife hovered a moment before whipping around, slashing two deep cuts across her own shoulders. The alicorn began to bleed.

My eyes widened. But I couldn't stare at her self-inflicted wounds. My eyes were pulled back to the pony skull with its long, slender horn.

The alicorn cast her spell and the blood from her wounds began to drip upwards, flowing out into the air, swirling and pooling. Her eyes glowed as the twin pools of floating blood forged themselves into wicked, curving blades.

I felt myself trembling again. Not with weakness but with horror. I knew that horn. I had seen it before in a memory.

Sister? You called for me?

The twin bloodswords launched through the air, spinning, slashing at me. One glanced off my barding, bouncing away. The other cut a deep wound across the left side of my neck. Blood began to pour down over my armor and left foreleg. I hissed in pain, staggering.

"Oh yes, I see you, my little pony!" the alicorn laughed from behind her shield. **"Did you really think you could hide from Nightseer with your pathetic little invisibility toy? What a silly little pony."**

The bloodswords spun back through the air at me. I felt another chill as I pulled out the Black Book, deflecting one of the swords with it as the other struck against my armor with enough force to bruise. The first sword disintegrated into flakes of ruddy powder as it rebounded from the Book.

"Oh! Well what do you have there?" the alicorn purred.

"What do you?" I grunted, feeling a wave of weakness and nausea. I was losing blood. I needed to take the healing potion before I bled out. But…

The other blade of blood slashed around. I cantered out of the way, the edge barely missing my muzzle. I floated the Black Book up, trying to strike it, but the blade dodged away, returning to its mistress. I tried to keep my eyes locked on the bloodsword, but my gaze slid from it, latching again on the sight of that skull. That slender horn…

This… this is going to be the Luna Academy for Young Unicorns? A magical school of my very own? Just like yours?

The ribs, the wings, the skull with its slender horn… I knew they were all from the same pony.

The blade straightened out and shot straight at me, aiming between my eyes. At the last moment I magically tossed the Book in front of my face. Red mist poured about its edges, the sword dissolving as it struck the black leather cover.

"I believe I'll be taking that." Nightseer focused, wrapping her magic around the Book. Her shield faltered for a moment as she felt the cold shock of the book's aura. But only for an eye-blink, not long enough for me to take advantage.

"You *dare!"* I was trembling even harder now. But not from weakness or horror. The alicorn took the Black Book, easily prying it from the grip of my telekinesis. But I didn't care. The Black Book was nothing to me. Not compared to what Nightseer wore around her neck like trophy.

"And you die," she said casually, almost yawning as she took the Book for herself. Motes of magic formed about her, fashioning themselves into eldritch knives.

My legs gave out. I dropped to my knees; they splashed into a thin pool of my own blood that was becoming saturated with pink. My lungs were burning. My head throbbing harder.

I didn't care. (Be Unwavering!) I focused on that skull with its long, slender horn.

The host of magical knives darted through the air at their target.

Nightseer glanced downward as she felt her necklace shift. With a telekinetic thrust, I drove Luna's horn through the soft tissue under Nightseer's muzzle and up into her brain.

She twitched once, the spark of life remaining in her just long enough for her eldritch knives to strike home. Most evaporated against my new barding, but several sunk in deep before vanishing along with Nightseer's shield spell as the alicorn crumpled to the ground.

* * *

No healing potions left. No super restoration potions left. Almost every unarmored part of my body wrapped in healing bandages.

I faced Princess Luna's private chambers – the room filled thickly with pink.

The Black Book was once again in my saddlebags. But my sense of obsession was fading, overpowered by other emotions. Just like the chill from the Book was overpowered by the heat of the fire behind me. I had stripped Luna's bones from Nightseer and I was burning them. It was the only semblance of a proper burial I could offer.

I faced Princess Luna's private chambers and I continued to pray.

The smoke from the fire behind me curled around me, black and acrid. The Pink Cloud floated out of the doorway in front of me in wisps. The smoke pushed its way inside as more of the Cloud flowed outward, forcing me to slowly step back until I could feel the heat of the fire breathing against my tail.

I jumped as I heard a boom of thunder from inside Princess Luna's chambers. The ceiling mosaic had changed, the puffy white clouds growing thick and dark. A moment later, it began to rain inside Luna's room, the sudden deluge washing the pink out of the air. I heard it gurgling out small vents in the floor.

Shaking, I began to laugh. I looked upward and shouted, "Thank you!" The Goddesses had heard me and answered my prayers!

Either that, or this was the most peculiar design for fire protection ever!

Galloping into the pouring rain, I looked about. Finding the switch was easy now. I threw my hooves against the pressure plate, then spun to face the chamber's only window, jumping up on the dilapidated remains of Luna's bed to keep my hooves out of the pink water that flooded the floor. Outside the window, I could hear pops and bangs. A ribbon of glittering golden light shot into the air and burst into a prismatic spray of light.

I fished out the pink gemstone just in time to see its soft glow fading. Success! The gem's light died and I saw the rune inside had burned out, replaced by a blackened smear within the stone.

I jumped on Luna's bed, squealing with glee as another light exploded outside the window, showering down on Canterlot with all the colors of Celestia's flowing mane. I knew that there were more fireworks going off that I couldn't see. Many more. For a moment, the thunderous explosions rivaled the sound of a hundred SteelHooves firing away. Then exceeded it.

I shifted away from the window, eager now to get back to my friends.

On the opposite wall I saw them. A collection of Ministry Mare statuettes. All six, gathered together, just like they should be. Lined up in a crystal display case. I realized that only Luna and Spike had kept intact collections. Even Rarity had separated the ponies in her set, giving herself to her sister Sweetie Belle, keeping Fluttershy with her wherever she went.

I wrapped my magic around the case, taking it with me.

* * *

"Will you look at all of this stuff?" Calamity said with a tone of awe.

Watcher had told us that the Ministry of Awesome had been repurposed as a warehouse. But I had never pictured this.

The interior walls had been knocked out. The entire building was a gigantic black void filled with seemingly endless rows of crates, filing cabinets and metal boxes. The rows were divided into clear sections that stretched the length of the building, each section filling with containers painted a single color. Small, diamond-shaped lights hung from the ceiling at intervals, many of which had burnt out. The effect was like staring down the length of a rainbow under a black sky sprinkled with stars.

"Are y'all seein' alla this?"

"Yes," Velvet Remedy said, staring.

"C'n we just…"

"No," I answered. It would take forever, and there was no way we could carry it all.

"How 'bout just one row?" Calamity pleaded.

"No." I looked about. "What we are looking for is behind a shield. And behind defenses. I don't think it's in this room. Which means it's probably below us. Fan out and look for a way down.

"Well shoot. Y'all are no fun!" Calamity complained as he flew off.

Pyrelight swooped into the air, a streak of emerald and gold between the rainbow and the darkness.

"Velvet, hold up," I said as she and SteelHooves began to trot down rows in the yellow section and green section respectively.

Velvet stopped, turning towards me. Then, unable to help herself, she struck a pose. "Admiring it?" she cooed. "Isn't this just *lovely?"* She was wearing the armor Calamity had given her. When I first saw her in it, my heart had skipped a beat. Now that she was posing, my heart skipped another.

She grinned, watching my expression. "Or… do you prefer this?" She dropped down into a sultry, pouty pose and my heart threatened to stop altogether. I felt suddenly hot.

"I-I… um… w-wow."

She beamed. Dammit, this wasn't fair. I wasn't supposed to be thinking like this about Velvet Remedy anymore. I needed Homage.

"So, how do I look?"

"Lickable," I whimpered.

She blinked innocently. "What was that?"

"Pretty!" I coughed, blushing. "Very, very pretty! And armored. Which is good. Good that you finally have some armor!"

She gave a charming laugh, getting up. "Why thank you, Littlepip." Looking up at the spot of air Calamity had recently occupied, she purred, "I hope I can get the same response from our flybuck."

"Our barded bard," I said, gazing at her.

Velvet Remedy facehoofed and shook her head. "I was waiting for somepony to say that. It had to be you, didn't it, Littlepip?"

I started, realizing that I had forgotten why I called her to hold back. "I have a gift for you too."

She blinked, putting down her hoof. "Really? You'd think it was my birthday." She watched as I pulled out a wrapped bundle. With a slightly chiding tone, "Is it a weapon?"

"No," I said, slightly wounded. "But this is very, very special. And you have to promise not to take it apart or remove anything from it. Ever."

Velvet Remedy now looked curious and slightly worried.

"Promise," I required. "It's important."

"All right, Littlepip. I can see that it is, at least to you. I promise."

I floated the bundle over to her, unwrapping the crystal case from Princess Luna's bedroom. Velvet Remedy gasped, her eyes going immediately to Fluttershy.

She reached out with her magic to take the case and I heard a sharp intake of air as the magic of each of the statuettes flooded over her at once. Back in the royal castle, picking up the case had not had any effect on me, but then I already possessed a full set; they were already giving me what they had to give. I kept a net of levitation magic beneath the crystal case just as a precaution should the gifts of the statuettes be overwhelming.

Velvet Remedy's eyes widened, first with alarm and then understanding. "Where?" she asked, her voice trembling a little. There were tears in her eyes.

"Princess Luna's private chambers. These were Hers. Now they are yours."

"And did you find…?"

"Just bones," I said sadly. "Their spirits have gone elsewhere." I didn't say more.

"Li'lpip! Yer four!" Calamity shouted as I emptied Little Macintosh into the body of the Ultra-Sentinel, penetrating its armor but failing to take it down. It rolled closer, moving fully into the aisle of orange boxes and cabinets. I spun, terrified to see another of the rainbow-painted robot tanks bearing down on me from behind, the turret of its main gun locking onto me.

Wrapping myself in a field of levitation, I kicked off from the ground. Both Ultra-Sentinels fired at me with high-explosive anti-tank guns, slaying each other.

WHBOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The next aisle over, SteelHooves was facing at least two more, opening up with his grenade machinegun. The tanks were taking the battering, firing back with a multi-gem, rapid-fire magical energy gun. The scream of the magical energy weapons dampened as one of the tanks went down. The flickering orbs of energy above my head and Calamity's popped as Velvet's disintegration ward saved SteelHooves from being turned to ash.

SteelHooves fired several more grenades, then retreated around the corner, smoke curling off his armor. Several plates of the armor were gone, taking melted flesh with them, leaving egregious and gaping wounds that seeped with the dark fluid that formed a Canterlot Ghoul's blood. He stumbled in pain. The missile launcher in his battle saddle was half-disintegrated; more than just a diet of scrap metal would be needed to repair the damage.

Calamity started to reach back for Spitfire's Thunder, but I waved him on. My E.F.S. compass was completely red, solid no matter which direction I turned. "There's got to be a hundred of these things in here, Calamity!" And this was only the first line of defense. The Goddesses knew what else was in here. "We aren't going to fight our way out of this. You need to find the controls and shut security down! You're the only one of us who can!"

I whipped out my sniper rifle, loaded with magically-enhanced bullets, and floated over the top of the shelves of crates, taking aim at the badly damaged tankbot which had sent SteelHooves running. The multi-gem magical energy weapon swung upwards on a universal joint, aiming all its barrels at me. We opened fire together.

My new armor took the first four of the five shots it got off in the space it took me to fire once. The fifth blast of magical energy struck me like a ball of molten steel, burning into my chest. Unbearable agony exploded in my chest as my ribcage saved my heart, but at the cost of one of my ribs disintegrating completely.

"AAAAAAAAAEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!" My magic imploded as I dropped.

Simultaneously, the bullet from my sniper rifle struck directly into the center of the tankbot's magical energy weapon, ripping through to its core matrix. The top of the Ultra-Sentinel exploded in a flash of multi-colored energy.

My body hit the shelf full of orange metal boxes like a rag doll, bouncing off and landing hard on the floor amongst the jagged shards of the slain tankbot. I felt one shard slice into my armor, jabbing into my stomach but not deeply.

An odd, static-like detonation echoed a few rows over. SteelHooves let out a scream, more of rage than pain as I heard his metal armor collapse to the floor.

I groaned, an indescribable pain in my chest. I was having trouble breathing.

"They're changing tactics again!" Velvet Remedy yelled from somewhere further away. "Li…"

The air filled with the sound of crackling explosions. A wash of charged energy flooded the aisle, bathing me, making the hairs of my coat and mane stand on end. My Eyes-Forward Sparkle winked off. I twisted about slowly, lifting my PipBuck. It was dead. Matrix-disruption grenades. That meant SteelHooves was immobile and my PipBuck was just a metal part of my leg until I could reboot it. Which might be tricky without SteelHooves' armor to reboot it from.

I heard the metallic whine and rumble as another Ultra-Sentinel rolled into my aisle. I tried to float my sniper rifle around to fire at it, only to realize I didn't have it anymore and wasn't sure where it was. It must have fallen into the other row.

This rainbow-painted tankbot had a grenade launcher as its primary weapon, probably the one that had just sprayed the area with matrix-disruption grenades. The secondary weapon was an integrated, high-powered rifle, and it was swinging around to aim at me.

I focused, the glow of my magic surrounding dozens of crates and metal boxes on each side of the aisle. I couldn't dislodge the tankbot's spark batteries before it could fire. But I could float enough crap into its way to act as a shield.

The tank depowered.

"Yee-HAW! And that's how we do it up in the sky!"

* * *

The shimmering field of magenta magical energy surrounded about one fourth of the basement. The shield was easily as powerful as the super-alicorn's shield in Fillydelphia. Velvet Remedy took a deep breath, looking a little nervous, then stepped forward. The direct descendent of Sweetie Belle passed through the shield unharmed. It didn't even frizz her mane.

She turned back to us, letting out a breath, looking relieved.

This part was easy. Actually explaining to Velvet what she needed to do to disable the generator was more difficult than bypassing the shield itself. I motioned her on with my hoof. At this point, the only thing that could go wrong is if she ran out of air inside there before deactivating the generator. Not something that seemed remotely likely.

A few minutes later, the shield melted away. Velvet stood at the depowered generator in the center, looking accomplished.

In here were the greatest secrets of the Ministry of Awesome.

I turned to Calamity, who was prancing in the air like a filly who just got her cutie mark. "Hate to do this to you, Calamity, but would you please go get the *Sky Bandit?"*

His face fell. I actually felt bad for him. "What? Now? But… But all…"

"SteelHooves can't move. My PipBuck is dead. We can't go back the way we came. We need to risk a landing right in front of the Ministry of Awesome." This was insane, but I couldn't think of another way. Fortunately, we had seriously thinned out the alicorns out in Ministry Walk, and the fireworks had scattered most of the rest. There was no telling for how long, though.

Calamity looked disappointed, almost grievously wounded by my request. I looked at him seriously. "You're the fastest and most maneuverable amongst us, and the only one who can bring our ride. Get the *Sky Bandit* and position yourself up above the Cloud. Take my binoculars and keep an eye out for us. The moment we're out, swoop down and get us."

"All right, dangit," he said dejectedly.

I floated out the pink gemstone with the scorch mark inside. "This is yours. It's done."

Calamity smiled wanly. "Thank ya, Li'lpip. Ah owe ya one." He slipped the gem into his pack, looking a little better. The orange-maned pegasus in the desperado hat pivoted and flew away, casting one look back at the treasures he was being denied. "Ah hope sacrifice is a virtue."

I rotated and looked at the crates and cabinets before me. On one end of the previously-shielded area was a maneframe and several terminals. In the center, under a spotlight, was a stand with small lockbox, the sort used to hold memory orbs.

I gasped as I saw the symbol emblazoned on the lockbox:

A burning hoof.

Minutes later, I was laying on the floor of the Ministry of Awesome, staring at the contents of the burning hoof lockbox.

Six memory orbs. Each sat in a plush velvet indentation with a symbol pinned underneath: an apple, a butterfly, a star, a balloon, a cloud with a bolt of lightning and finally a diamond.

I took a deep breath, then leaned forward and touched my horn to the first one.

* * *

The Lightning Cloud Orb

I felt my host swallow nervously as she walked into the darkened, circular chamber. Huge, arched windows stretched upwards, giving a breathtaking view of a brilliantly starry night. A circular window above the arches perfectly framed the moon.

Moonlight fell through the chamber to illuminate a large, round table. There were seven chairs – six with emblems emblazoned on their backs, one which was taller than the others and inlaid with obsidian and lapis lazuli. My host strode up between the chairs, looking at the table. The chairs were cushioned in red. The same emblem from the back of each chair was also inlaid in the table before them where a dinner plate might be set.

To my host's left was the image of gears and sparks, bisected with a blade: the symbol of the Steel Rangers and the Ministry of Wartime Technology. To her right was the image of a large star ringed with smaller ones, a tall horn above them and wings to each side: the symbol of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Directly across the table, I could see a cross overlaid with a butterfly. My host didn't look at the others.

The rest of the table was taken up with a map of Equestria. There were markings indicating battle lines where the zebras had managed to push into the country. Most of the war, however, was being waged in the zebra's homeland, and in the seas and lands between. My host's gaze lingered on a small part of Equestria that had been lost, including a crescent-shaped canyon.

Littlehorn Valley.

All over the map of Equestria, tall mushroom-shaped models had been placed. At first, I thought they marked balefire bombs, but then I realized they were white, and their stalks where tall and needle-thin. Towers.

Somepony flew overhead, picking up one of the towers in her teeth and moving it half an inch. "The Fillydelphia Tower should be on that side of the city," Rainbow Dash said as she landed on the opposite side of the table, sitting down in one of the chairs. The symbol in front of it was almost identical to her cutie mark, but with purple wings lined in black. I had seen that symbol on one of her Shadowbolts uniforms.

"Where should Ah sit?" my host asked, her voice holding a reserved country twang.

Rainbow Dash shrugged. "Why not sit in your sister's chair? I'm sure AJ wouldn't mind."

Apple Bloom's eyes widened. "Ah couldn't do that!"

A door opened, and Princess Luna strode into the room. I felt a javelin skewer my heart. Apple Bloom and Rainbow Dash both bowed as the Princess took Her chair at the head of the table.

"Good night, Rainbow Dash. Welcome back, Apple Bloom."

Apple Bloom gulped.

"Please, up."

I didn't want her to stand back up. This was… painful. I was in the presence of Luna, my Goddess, living and well, not an hour after having burned Her bones. After having seen Her defiled by an alicorn! I wished for Apple Bloom to remain bowed. Or at least, look away.

Apple Bloom stood back up, realizing Rainbow Dash had already been standing, and turned her attention to the Princess.

"It is good to hear you are finally doing something with the Ministry that I gave you, Rainbow Dash," the Princess said, chiding a little. "Now, tell me about this new project. It seems…vast."

"Oh yeah!" Rainbow Dash grinned, flapping her wings. It seemed she couldn't remain seated long. "Remember how you told me you wanted my help building the Equestrian Skyguard? Well, here's my answer: the Single Pegasus Project!"

"Sounds… impressive," Princess Luna said patiently. "What is it?"

"In a word: weather control!"

"That's two words," Apple Bloom whispered to the cyan pegasus, who shot her a look.

The Single Pegasus Project was… weather control? Well, I guessed that made some sense, if the Enclave was able to alter the towers so that they could plant crops in the clouds.

"Weather control?" Luna said, tilting her head curiously, echoing my thoughts, then taking them in a whole different direction. "So this project will allow us to rain lightning down on enemy positions? Mire their convoys with torrential downpours? Drive them back with hurricanes and hail?"

Rainbow Dash's jaw nearly hit the floor.

She closed it, zipping around the room. "Oooh yeah! This is even more awesome than I thought! I mean, I knew it would be awesome. But I never even realized just *how* awesome it would be!"

Princess Luna chuckled. Oh Goddess, I loved that chuckle. I was in awe of it. "Then what were you thinking of using it for?"

Rainbow Dash stopped in mid-loop, and hovered, turning back to the Princess as she shook off a blush. "Well, way I see it, this war will be won through air superiority. No offense to Twilight. I mean, we have it. They don't."

She flew up to the table. "Problem is: we don't have enough combat fliers. Especially now that the zebras are using dragons. There simply aren't enough pegasi because they're all too busy already keeping control of the weather. And the ones we do have often have to leave for other obligations. Hell, even I have to abandon the war once a year to help Ponyville wrap-up winter!"

"Surely some other pegasus…" Princess Luna started to say, but Rainbow Dash interrupted (!) Her.

"Not a chance. They need me. I won't leave Ponyville hanging."

Princess Luna looked cross for just a moment, then smiled and nodded. "Of course." Looking back at the map, She bid, "Continue."

"Well, with the Single Pegasus Project, we're gonna finally automate all of our weather making and weather control systems. The towers you see here will control the weather over each area," the wild, rainbow-maned pegasus grinned broadly, almost dancing with anticipation. "Check this out!"

Rainbow Dash pulled out a little switch and tossed it. Both Apple Bloom and Princess Luna jumped as a crack of thunder roared over the table, and black rings of smoke expanded out from each of the model towers, crackling with energy.

"That would start rain!" Having seen a downpour from Princess Luna's ceiling, I was mildly surprised when miniature clouds didn't form and start flooding the table.

"I designed it after the contrails of the Wonderbolts!" Rainbow Dash boasted. "Everything about the Single Pegasus Project goes through me, and it doesn't get my hoof of approval unless it's cool!…"

I felt my host roll her eyes.

"…And it will all be under the management of one single pegasus in the Rainbow Dash Hub of Pure Awesome!…"

"We're still decidin' on a name," Apple Bloom quickly interjected at Princess Luna's chagrined expression.

Rainbow Dash looked a little put out. "Hey, it's my project, and my Ministry…"

"Anyway," Apple Bloom said, taking over, "The pony in the central hub will be placed into a sort of… induced coma."

"Induced coma?" Princess Luna said, sounding shocked.

"We haven't 'xactly worked that part out yet either," Apple Bloom admitted.

"But we're really close!" Rainbow Dash interjected swiftly. "Apple Bloom's company is working on modifying a life support pod, and I'm gonna be talking to Twilight and Rarity to see if they have any ideas that could help."

"I see." The Princess didn't sound fully convinced.

"And hooked up to one of our new Crusader computers," Apple Bloom continued only to have Rainbow Dash interrupt again.

"Yeah. But none of that download-your-brain nonsense. I had them disconnect all that stuff. I want a living pony running Equestria's weather, not some machine that *thinks* it's a pony."

Apple Bloom sighed. Then continued once more, "The pony in the life support pod will be mentally linked into the Crusader, which will allow her to manage running all of Equestria's weather."

"Does it have to be a pegasus?" the Princess asked.

"Yes!" Rainbow Dash proclaimed. "Well, no. Not technically. But it should be."

Princess Luna looked over the map and all its towers, at least four dozen in all. "You have given me a lot to think about. This would be a massive expenditure of resources…"

"But totally worth it!" Rainbow Dash pushed, sounding hopeful.

Princess Luna nodded. "Most likely," She agreed with a smile. "And I believe the Ministries of Morale and Image each have proposals that could be integrated into this." The Princess stood. "And the central hub will be a prime target for assault, so it will need the best defenses that the Ministries of Arcane Sciences and Wartime Technology can devise."

"But… it will still be my project, right?" Rainbow Dash asked. "It will still be the Ministry of Awesome?

"Of course."

* * *

Velvet Remedy and I trotted back down the red row, SteelHooves floating along beside me, our weapons and supplies floating behind. I winced, holding a hoof to my chest. Velvet Remedy had done the best she could for me with her magic, rebuilding the rib I had lost, but it hurt like hell and I was still having trouble breathing. The damage had weakened me, and it would take time (and potions) before I would regain my endurance.

I plan to ascend, Red Eye had told me. *Somepony will have to take up the tasks that the Princesses and pegasi left to run wild, after all. Somepony will have to regulate the weather, to raise the sun and the moon.*

Weather control. Now I knew how he intended to pull that off, just as I knew how he was going to become a God capable of doing Celestia's and Luna's tasks. (And I realized he *would* be able to move the sun and moon too, since neither of Them stood in the way to, as Princess Luna had told Midnight Shower, "trump" his efforts.) I wasn't sure on the details, but by now I had learned enough to know that Red Eye had a plan, even if I couldn't see it. That cyberpony knew *exactly* what he was doing.

After hacking the Ministry of Awesome's terminal, I had been able to review the specifics of the Single Pegasus Project. Unfortunately, without my PipBuck, I had no way of saving a copy of any information or schematics. It occurred to me that I may need to have the memory recorded so I could review it later. What I didn't know, what I didn't learn until a lot later, was that accessing that terminal had set off alarms someplace far away. And that the war was coming.

Several things were clear. The Single Pegasus Project was indeed designed for

Equestria-wide weather control. The center hub for the S.P.P. was located above the clouds, and had some of the most fearsome defenses I had ever imagined, including a shield that put the one in the Ministry of Awesome to shame. There was a bypass spell on the shield, but I had no idea who it was designed to allow through. My guess was Rainbow Dash.

The suspended animation pod from which the entire Single Pegasus Project was supposed to be run was unoccupied. It had never been activated.

A dull rumble shook the Ministry of Awesome. The lights above swayed, dust showered down, and poorly stacked boxes thudded to the floor throughout the building.

I looked up, shocked from my reverie. I turned to Velvet Remedy as another tremor vibrated the floor. We trotted faster, my chest beginning to ache badly as we picked up the pace.

We flung the doors open…

…and were greeted by chokingly thick pink and flames!

My lungs collapsed, and I fell to the ground, my magic imploding, dropping SteelHooves. I felt myself dying, the Pink Cloud tearing me apart like I was filled with Fillydelphia parasprites. Velvet Remedy collapsed next to me with a weak cry.

The basement of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences had exploded. The suffering alicorn had finally lost her battle. Or perhaps the clinking chains had let off a spark. The whole Ministry was on fire, as were the dead trees. All of them, including the ones that formed the Ministry of Peace. I could hear the building groaning as it began to buckle.

The basement had been huge, stretching under about a third of Ministry Walk; and when it blew, the explosion breached the tunnel between the royal treasury and Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. The remains of the field were filling with an instantly lethal concentration of Pink Cloud. Setting off the Gala fireworks and turning the mother dragon into a mouse had not made all that Cloud magically disappear. It was more diffused here, but that just meant we had seconds more to live. Maybe a full minute, and most of that without consciousness.

My vision blurred and darkened. I felt Pyrelight thump down limply on my back. I barely saw the shadow of the Sky Bandit dropping out of the air above us. Velvet Remedy shoved all three of the super restoration potions she was still carrying into my muzzle, making me drink, then fell into unconsciousness.

I felt my body jolted alive as the overdose of healing magic flooded through me. I was alive to the point I was burning up. My nerves were on fire. But I was conscious, and that was enough to levitate everypony and everything around me. I tossed us all onto the *Sky Bandit,* shouting for Calamity to fly as fast as he could. Already, I was beginning to weaken, the Cloud clawing at me.

The Pink Cloud was hurting Calamity too, and fast was not very fast at all. I could hear him grunt, straining to keep us aloft, whinnying with the effort. I pulled open Velvet Remedy's medical boxes. We were out of super restoration potions, but maybe she had a healing potion left? Nothing. I closed it and crawled around to her other side, but before I could open the box, Calamity fell unconscious. The *Sky Bandit* began to fall.

I tried to focus, but my brain felt like it was being beaten with a sledgehammer. I screamed with the effort. My lungs were hot coals in my breast. Tapping into reserves I shouldn't have had anymore (Be Strong! Be Unwavering! Be Awesome!), I enveloped us with my magic, my horn flaring with an overglow. The strain was excruciating. The *Sky Bandit* drifted downwards until it splashed into the river, heavily ribboned with pink, which formed a moat around the front of Canterlot. I was tossed forward, falling on top of Velvet Remedy.

The *Sky Bandit* seemed willing to float, the magic that allowed Calamity to pull it through the air with all of us inside apparently making it buoyant. Or maybe the Goddesses were again showing us mercy. Either way, I released my magic, falling weakly to the floor of the passenger wagon. I pressed a hoof against Velvet Remedy's neck and checked Pyrelight's breathing. They were both unconscious but alive. I prayed neither of them were in a coma.

The passenger wagon began to turn lazily in the flowing water. My ears perked as they caught the roar of the waterfall. "Oh… oh no." So much for the mercy of the Goddesses.

I didn't even waste the energy of getting back to my hooves. I threw my magic around the *Sky Bandit* and prayed.

The passenger wagon reached the edge and began to tip. My horn flared again, enveloped by another overglow as I struggled to keep us from somersaulting. The water continued to shove us over the outcropping.

We burst through the Pink Cloud. We were falling.

I pushed us forward, as far away from the falling water as I could while we fell. I kept us from flipping, and slowed our fall, but I didn't have the strength to stop our fall completely, or even really guide us.

Canterlot was a long way up the side of the mountain.

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Velvet Remedy was thrown from the passenger wagon when the *Sky Bandit* hit the Zebratown aqueduct with a jarring thud! It was almost wide enough for the passenger wagon to slide down broadside; her body landed in the aqueduct and was swept away in the rushing water.

"Whoa Nelly!"

Calamity jerked conscious, flapping his wings hard as he could. I dodged SteelHooves' sliding body and jumped out after Velvet as Calamity struggled to get the passenger wagon under his control.

I heard a peeling metallic scream behind me as the *Sky Bandit* scraped against the walls of the aqueduct, Calamity trying to pull up. Ahead of me, I saw Velvet's body. I lashed out with my telekinesis. Water splashed into my muzzle. I wheezed, fire igniting in my lungs again, worse than before. My magic faltered on the edge of burnout.

I focused harder, kicking with all four legs as I battled to keep my head above the water while concentrating on Velvet Remedy. I had to get us out of the water before she drowned!

I cast out my magic again and this time I caught her, lifting her up out of the water even as we both rushed down the aqueduct. I began to draw her closer, reel her in. Now I was merely struggling to keep from being pulled under.

It was a losing battle; I was not even an adequate swimmer. My head went under and my lungs took in water. I broke the surface again, coughing violently. My magic had imploded and Velvet had fallen back into the water two pony's-lengths in front of me.

One of the collapsed sections of the aqueduct loomed just ahead.

I kicked, this time propelling myself forward. I reached out, hooking my foreleg around Velvet's, trying to grab a hold of her, wishing I had talons rather than hooves. I got my other foreleg around her neck. We twisted about in the water, rushing towards the edge, as I tried to keep either of us from drowning. I fought to wrap us in magic, but I was too overstressed and exhausted. The spell wouldn't manifest.

We washed over the side, plummeting towards the broken blocks of the aqueduct below.

Calamity caught us!

…And promptly splash-landed at the edge of the lake which had formed beneath the broken aqueduct. Velvet Remedy and I flew out of his forelegs and hit mud, sliding to a stop.

I struggled to get up. To crawl over to her and make sure she was still breathing. I would have settled for squirming through the mud if it got me closer. But my body wouldn't respond at all. It had quit. Too much trauma, too much stress, in too short a period of time.

Enough.

The Diamond Orb

The wash from the landing Griffinchaser IV tugged at my hood and flapped my cloak behind me. I watched as Rarity stepped off the flying machine, her head bundled in a fashionable scarf to protect her mane from the wind.

She trotted towards me as the pony-peddled whirligig lifted back into the brilliant blue sky. I basked in the light and warmth of the midday sun, such a rare and precious gift, as my host watched the beautiful white unicorn approach.

"There you are!" she smiled as if my host had been lost. "Is everything ready?"

"Yes, Mistress Rarity," my host said in a naturally husky voice. "If I may ask, who will be the victim of this spell?"

Rarity cocked her head, looking at my host oddly. "Why me, of course." I felt my host's jaw drop. "I wouldn't dream of doing something like this to any other pony."

"O-of course," my host said, clearly taken aback. "Then, if I may ask, how many?" The Griffinchaser IV was now far enough away that the wind had died. The squeaking sound of the machine was fading into the distance.

Rarity motioned with a hoof for my host to follow, walking towards a set of glass doors on a quaintly non-descript building. My host galloped forward and tipped his head. I felt the casual flow of magic as he opened the door for the Ministry Mare.

"Why thank you!" she beamed at him. "Such manners." Rarity gave my host a kiss on the horn.

He turned and followed her inside, watching her reverently. She was gorgeous, sexy in a way that transcended her age, regal… and my host was male, yet the only stirring was in his heart. He was a perfect gentlestallion, and not just in appearance. I found he was a male I didn't mind having as my host in the slightest. And I felt ashamed, remembering what I had done weeks ago while sick in SteelHooves' shack. My host was a better pony than I.

"Forty-two," Rarity announced.

My host stopped dead, his heart skipping a beat, and not in a good way. His muzzle gaped, his eyes widening in shock if, not outright horror. "F-f-f-forty-two!?" My own mind was reeling.

"Well, actually forty-three," she said whimsically. "I do wish to keep a small part for myself."

"You…" My host stood there, shaking. "You want me to cut your soul into forty-two pieces?" he said weakly. "I mean… forty-three?"

"Yes," she nodded primly. Rarity smiled, walking up to my host and putting a hoof on his shoulder. "Don't worry. I know you can do this."

"I-I…" My host blinked.

"I'm always telling ponies that my top magician is the absolute master when it comes to magic and cutting things," she said encouragingly. "And that, Snips, is you."

My host, Snips, swallowed nervously and nodded.

"Now, is the chamber ready? You've had enough time with the Black Book?"

Snips nodded again. "But… Mistress Rarity, forty-three? I can't be sure you'll survive! Or what you'll be like afterwards."

Rarity's smile faltered, revealing a deep sadness behind her mask. "I'll survive. We all will." She pulled her warm, confident demeanor back on. "Now, I've sent Snails the soul jars. He'll be doing the guidance, so don't you worry about that. From what I've read, the shards will seek out the vessels themselves, so it's practically idiot-proof." She patted me on the shoulder. "Just worry about the cutting."

"Shards of your soul," my host said softly.

Pieces, a *lot* of pieces, began to fall into place.

"Yes." Rarity took a deep breath. "Now, I'll be right down. I need to freshen up a bit first."

She began to trot off, then turned and looked beseechingly at my host. All pretense of being happy or worry-free had evaporated. She looked scared. "Snips? Will it hurt?" Her voice was almost like that of a filly.

Snips swallowed hard, frowned, and admitted, "Mistress Rarity, it will probably redefine torture."

Rarity gave a little shake and strangled back a soft whimper. Then pulled herself together, lifting her head high. "Well, at least it will be quick."

She disappeared down the hall.

My host watched her go until the shadows of the hallway enveloped her. Then he turned, using his magic to push a block high in the wall. A grating sound filled the hallway as stones slid into stones, revealing a hidden stairwell that descended into blackness.

Minutes later, my host was standing in a darkened ritual chamber. The only light was from a few glowing gemstones set within strange glyphs that shimmered with crimson liquid, and a single candle. The candle illuminated a stand upon which the Black Book rested.

The air in the room was exceedingly chilly. I could see my host's breath.

"Forty-three, Snails," my host moaned. "Rarity wants me to cut her soul into forty-three pieces! I… I don't know if I can do it."

"Forty-three?" the other, taller robed unicorn asked slowly. "But… there's only forty two soul jars. I counted. Twice, just in case I messed up the first time."

"Yeah. She says she wants to keep one piece for herself."

"What? Is she givin' the rest away as gifts or somethin'?"

Snips shook his head. "I don't know." He looked up. "Hey, Snails, you okay?"

"Yeah," the other unicorn said slowly. "I just hope I won't mess anything up."

I felt Snips sigh. "Hey, you won't mess it up. Mistress Rarity wouldn't entrust something this big to ponies she thought would mess it up." He gave Snails an encouraging smile. "Remember what Rarity always says about you."

"That I'm tall?"

"No, the other thing," Snips urged.

"That I may be slow, but I always get there event-u-ally," Snails said, his voice building in confidence. "And that's better than she can say for most ponies."

"That's right!" Snips clapped. "Now go to the soul jars and be ready. This… this is really going to happen."

"Well, we always wanted to see awesome magic," Snails reminisced. "And this is the most awesomest."

"Yeah," Snips said, sounding a little nervous again.

The room was dark and cold and still.

The light of the candle flickered as the candle slowly burnt down.

It felt like forever before Rarity came down the stairs. When she did, she was wrapped in a black, hooded robe, like she was attending her own funeral. Without a word, she walked into the center of the chamber, standing in the midst of all the softly glowing gems.

Snips turned towards her, levitating the Black Book in front of him. Carefully, he read the alien words, words from a long dead zebra tongue, born of madness or possibly born of the stars. I felt my host concentrate, pouring all his focus into the spell. I felt power wash over me, not only from within but from without. Power drawn from strange, black places.

The magic was vile and repulsive. I felt violated.

Rarity lifted from the floor, beginning to float upwards as a small magical vortex pooled beneath her. The vortex of eldritch energy rose up and began to wrap itself about the unicorn mare, curling around her like a cocoon or a constricting snake. Her expression was one of mounting worry, edging swiftly toward panic… but never getting there. Instead, the screaming began.

I wanted to pull out of the memory orb. I couldn't bear to hear those screams. Not just of pain but of nightmarish mental anguish. I remembered my hellish ride in the autonomous healing booth. What the spell was doing to Rarity was orders of magnitude worse!

The black magic washed over Snips, pooling at the tip of his horn, then taking flight.

A sphere of pure void, blacker than absolute darkness, took flight from our horn and collided with the eldritch energies spinning about Rarity.

There was an explosion as darkness turned to light, and the eldritch energies transformed into a prismatic legion of shattered lights, streaking over Snips' head, leaving bright plasma trails behind them as they homed in on their receptacles.

Snips never turned to watch. He never even looked at the soul jars. The unicorn buck only had eyes for Rarity, and he dashed to catch her as she fell, unconscious, to the floor.

But then, he didn't have to. I already knew what they were.

* * *

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How far would you go for your friends?

How much would you give up for them?

With all I had seen of Rarity, I knew her deepest fear and greatest pain was losing her friends. Seeing them drift apart. Fracturing.

Oh no, I'm fine. It's just… sometimes it feels like we're pulling apart. And I can't stand to see that happen. I really must do something about it.

What did I know of soul jars? I knew that they were virtually indestructible, eternal.

I knew that you could hang other spells on them, allowing those spells to last effectively forever.

But if you touched it, or focused your magic on it, then a spell… took a picture of your soul.

I remembered being Spike as Rarity led all her friends down a hallway to see Rainbow Dash's new armor. I recalled the strange carpet we had walked across, and the sudden chill when Spike had stepped on it. Twilight Sparkle had reacted to it as well. Of course she had; Twilight had felt that particular chill before, from Rarity's mirror. I even suspect she was about to call Rarity on it when Rarity distracted her with Rainbow Dash.

Then a second enchantment allowed the mirror to show that image.

A reflection of the soul. Of who you truly were, deep inside. A picture is only a picture. But a picture with that spell placed upon it would be more than just an image of the pony. It would radiate with an aura of her true soul.

And Twilight? Pinkie Pie had asked in that final message, the one Twilight Sparkle had never received. *Do you think… maybe… you could go with me? I'm… kinda scared. And it isn't the sort of scared that goes away with giggling. I mean, I have you with me now, so you'll kinda be with me anyway…"*

I should be there for her. Like she's with me. Somepony should be there… Scootaloo had said, coughing violently. *Just want Dash to know… we didn't all… She's not alone.*

Forty-two.

Only forty-two were ever made, Watcher… Spike had told me. Seven sets of six. One for each of the Ministry Mares, and one for Princess Luna.

Concentrating, I opened my saddlebags and floated out Rarity's soul jars, setting them before me. All together. They were stronger, better that way.

Be Strong!

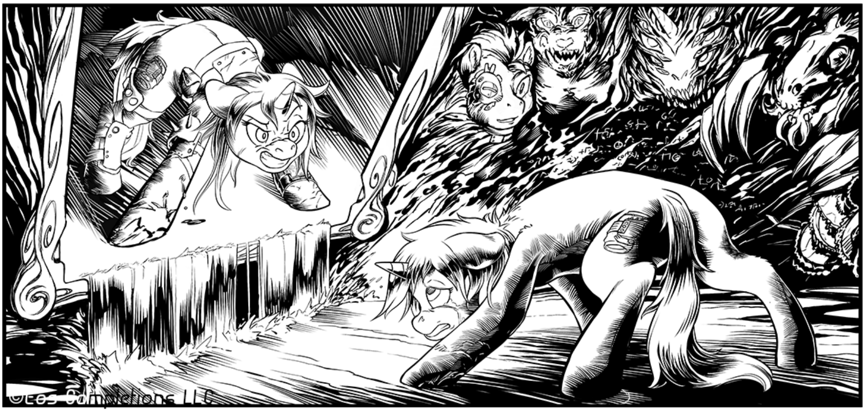
Be Pleasant.
Be Unwavering!
Be Smart.
Be Awesome!
Awareness! It was under 'E'!

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: My Little Ponies – You have collected one of each of the six Ministry Mares statuettes. Stronger together than they are apart, they have granted you +1 Luck in addition to their normal benefits.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Peace in Our Time



"Be good… or I'll shoot you dead."

Enough.

My abused body was through. My nerves didn't even have the will to scream at me anymore. My muscles arched dully, my insides hurt, my PipLeg itched. I could feel the mud slowly squishing in between my armor and coat, seeping through the hole the Ultra-Sentinel had burned in my chest.

I didn't care. My friends needed me. Velvet Remedy was unconscious (oh please, let her just be unconscious). I had tried to save her from drowning, but she'd gone under more than once, and now she was just laying there, unmoving.

A few yards away, the *Sky Bandit* was half-sunk in the lake, the front end thrust upwards over the muddy shore. I heard a grunt from the air to my left where Calamity hung from the *Sky Bandit's* harness.

"Ugh. Nnngh!" Calamity's legs kicked circles in the air. "Oh pony feathers!"

My attention was focused on Velvet Remedy. I was desperate to get closer to her, to see if she was all right, but my body ignored me. I tried to pull her close, but my magic flickered over her limp form and died. Too much strain.

She wasn't breathing. I could see no lift and fall from her body.

Oh Goddesses, *Velvet Remedy wasn't breathing!*

"Calamity!" I shouted hoarsely, terror surging through me. "Velvet's not breathing! Help her!"

"Ah'm tryin'!" Calamity shouted back, suddenly thrashing in his harness. "Ah can't get down!" His wings flapped and his hooves kicked.

My mind was exploding in panic. Every second, she was dying. And I still couldn't get to her, couldn't even crawl. My horn flared with the surge of adrenaline. There was not enough in me to wrap around Velvet, but that flush of power was enough to pull apart the clasps of Calamity's harness, dropping the rust-colored pegasus into the mud. He scrambled to Velvet's side and began pumping his hooves against her breast, pausing only to breathe for her.

Behind him, a groan rose up as the *Sky Bandit* slipped further into the lake. With a start, I realized SteelHooves was still in the back of the passenger wagon, paralyzed in his dead armor, unable to move as he sunk into the water. I knew he couldn't drown, but the thought of being trapped in a watery grave had to be horrifying. My mind immediately conjured memories of my nightmarish imprisonment in the healing booth.

Calamity continued fervently, trying to bring life back to Velvet Remedy.

Tones of grey bled into my vision. My whole self cried out for rest, begging me to just let go, just go to sleep. But I fought the cool embrace of darkness, the little pony in my head kicking and screaming, telling me that if I let it overtake me, I would never wake up again. If I lost consciousness now, I could slip into a coma. And somehow, I knew it wouldn't be a peaceful sleep. All the nightmares of the healing booth awaited for me down there.

I heard a choked, sputtering cough from Velvet Remedy. My panic lifted, my heart crying out. Oh thank the Goddesses!

The grip of panic eased around my heart and mind, and blackness rushed in like a surging ocean. I think I heard Calamity fire his battle saddle and yell something, but he sounded too far away. Then nothing.

* * *

Visions of my life in Stable Two passed before my eyes. Boring, dull, safe, grey. Devoid of any real life, empty of friends or of purpose. A job where I was helping no pony. Out of a sense of responsibility and a hope, I braved the possible nothingness beyond the Stable door, leaving that peace behind. Trading it for pain and horror as I searched for *her.*

I remembered my first day, and how the daylight seemed so strange to me, beautiful yet odd and unhealthy, strained by the curtain of clouds above us. I saw how stupid and foalish I had been, plunging headlong into places like Ironshod Firearms and Stable Twenty-Four, repeatedly risking my life and later those of my friends, driven by curiosity and a need for answers. I was lucky to still be alive.

My friends swam before me. My fearless first friend Calamity, always by my side, always ready to catch me when I fell. I owed him my life, over and over. Velvet Remedy, the real mare (not the one of my foalish fantasies) with the caring heart who tended to me while I was sick, and who took my burden when the return home was too much for me to bear. SteelHooves, met in battle with a flurry of explosions. I had seen him conquer his own demons to fight alongside Xenith and to finally step up to lead a new force for good in the Equestrian Wasteland. And Xenith herself, pulled from Red Eye's hell of industry and slavery, a tortured mare, a survivor who became our guide in Old Olneigh, one of the most grim and deadly places the wasteland had to offer.

My mind filled with voices. The voice of DJ Pon3, broadcasting out of Manehattan, bringing messages of warning and hope, and making us out to be heroes. I remembered that first real voice from the past, that message from Scootaloo, a hello from one of the ponies who had shaped the world and watched it fall. From them, I learned of virtues, of sacrifice and of failure. Even though they were gone, they had become my family almost as much as my living friends. I was no longer alone.

I recalled moments of joy, times I had almost forgotten. Breakfast with Gawd at Junction R-7. My water fight with Homage in the pouring rain. My head filled with shadows. The horribly damaged Pinkie Bell with her balefire bomb she was saving for fireworks. The accidental shot (BLAM!) on Bucklyn Bridge.

I dreamt that I was drowning in blood, a crimson river from all those whom I had slain. The memory of Arbu transformed that terror into reality. Of all the things I had struggled against – raiders and slavers, zombie zebras and even a dragon – the greatest threat had always been from myself. The darkness and the rage that hid within me. Addiction and failure.

My soul was weary. I needed rest. Hadn't I been through enough? I had tried to do good, I had tried to help. I had pushed myself through torture and horror. Death awaited me, and I could hear the sweet, cajoling song of the grim reaper pony, offering me final respite.

I wanted to go to her. Let her wrap me in her cloak of blackness and unending sleep.

But even here, the little pony in my head fought with me, reminding me that there was still too much to do before I could allow myself peace. There were still ponies who needed me. Red Eye still threatened Tenpony Tower and my beloved Homage. There was still a Goddess out there bent on the extinction of ponykind through Unity.

As long as you're willing to face the fire…

Well, fuck. My little pony was right. As much as I yearned otherwise, I had to return. To regain consciousness…

* * *

I moaned, rolling onto my side. My body was covered in a sickly sweat. Unpleasant warmth rushed through me, and my head and stomach churned with nausea. I itched from dried mud.

I was laying on a filthy cot in a ramshackle wooden structure that stank of damp wood and rot. I tried to push myself up, my legs trembling weakly before giving out. The effort caused my gut to rebel, and I found the strength to roll over and vomit. Mercifully, there was an old mop bucket next to the bed, seeming to exist just for the purpose of being filled with my sickness. My throat burned, the inside of my mouth turning horrid. The stench of my throw-up made my eyes water and drove my stomach to churn and release even more.

I collapsed back, tears in my eyes. This had happened before. Illness brought on by physical overexertion, mental turmoil and the nastiness of the wasteland. We needed to go. I didn't have time to be bedridden again for days.

Canterlot had been physiologically brutal, the Pink Cloud and the broadcasters putting my brain and insides through a grinder. The loss of a rib was traumatic and terrifying. The scar there, like the one on my neck, would never fully heal. My PipBuck had fused to my coat and flesh. Was it any surprise my health was falling apart?

The memory orbs had been emotionally gut-wrenching. Part of me screamed to gallop back to the Ministry of Peace just to give Rarity a proper burial. But even before we had left the Ministry of Awesome, the fires and Cloud had made that impossible. The heart-rending blow of watching Applejack step out of that elevator… and realizing that Applesnack had intended to propose to her that very night, and she was anticipating it… oh Goddesses.

I fought to get up only to fail again. I must not be this weak. My sickness could be costing lives.

Goddesses, where was I? My eyes moved slowly over the filth. A few empty bottles, rubbish, a doorway without a door and the stained sheet that covered it. Not SteelHooves' shack.

"Now… let's get ya set up jus' like that." I heard Calamity's voice drift in from the next room, followed by a loud thump of metal against splintering wood. I felt the urge to call out to him. "The gal was fine enough t' let me rent this here set o' magically powered armor long 'nuff fer us t' reboot ya. Should have ya mobile in no time."

"Are you sure you know what you are doing, Calamity?" SteelHooves' voice followed his. "Maybe you should wait for Littlepip."

"An' leave y'all stuck like this?"

Xenith's voice chimed in, "Is it wrong that I want to stick him in poses?"

Even feeling as wretched as I did, I had to bury my muzzle into the mattress to stifle a snicker. I felt better knowing three of my friends were just on the other side of that filthy curtain.

"Try it and I will hurt you," SteelHooves warned, grumbling. "Calamity… hurry."

"So, which end do Ah plug this inta again?" Calamity asked, feigning confusion. The levity in his voice betrayed him.

"Just hurry. Before the zebra gets any other ideas."

"Thank you, SteelHooves," Xenith said quietly. "For helping my daughter's village. I know it must be hard for an old soldier to help zebra kin."

I mentally grasped at that through the swimming in my head. We were in Glyphmark. Through the doorway, I realized the next room had fallen still.

"Applejack was afraid of zebras," SteelHooves finally said. "It took her little sister to show her that they are people just like ponies. Good folk, most of them." I listened, surprised, as Applesnack opened up to Xenith. "She never forgot that. Not even in the blackest hours of the war. Not even when her closest zebra friend betrayed her…" His voice seemed to freeze. SteelHooves' low, rumbling voice impossibly dropped even lower. "…or so we believed."

Again, the room beyond mine filled with a pregnant quiet.

"Applejack would have wanted her rangers to protect all good people. Not just ponies."

I loved SteelHooves a little more at that moment.

After a moment, Calamity spoke up, changing the topic. "How are they?"

"Neither has woken," Xenith's voice turned solumn. Neither? Velvet Remedy is still unconscious? I once again felt a twinge of panic. How long had it been since Canterlot? "Although Littlepip moans and mutters fevered things in her sleep."

"Littlepip is awake," SteelHooves announced. "She's probably eavesdropping."

I also hated SteelHooves just a little bit right then. Go ahead and put him in silly poses, Xenith!

I was shivering when Xenith came in. Somehow, my body had gone from overly hot to unpleasantly cold.

"The metal ghoul was right," Xenith intoned casually, "You are awake."

"W-what about Velvet?"

"She still slumbers," Xenith informed me. "I have given her what salves and remedies I know, but only she can find her way back to us as you have done."

"She will," I assured her. "Velvet Remedy's stronger than she looks."

"So are you," the zebra said as she placed a hoof on my forehead just below my horn.

I groaned. "Well, that's easy when you look pathetic." Xenith smirked ever-so-slightly.

"We need to go…" I started to say, trying a third time to stand. I forced my forehooves under me, lifting myself just enough to reach the mop bucket as another wave of nausea swept over me.

Xenith watched as I vomited. "You are sick," she said grimly (and quite unnecessarily). "You need to rest. I will not allow us to go until you are well enough for the journey. Another day at least. Maybe two."

"How long…?" I asked, spitting into the bucket of sick, trying to clear the acidic foulness from my tongue and teeth.

"Less than a day," Xenith told me. "Calamity has been negotiating with your trader friend to get the things you need. And he has been putting armor on our flying vessel. If there is one thing Glyphmark is not poor in, it is scraps."

I had wondered when he was going to get around to that. Nodding, I tried to reason with Xenith, "One night. But then we have to go. I'll prop myself up with crutches if I have to."

"No," Xenith said flatly. "I decide when we go, and I say: not until you are at least able to walk on your own and hold food. Only then will I consider it. Assuming that the medical pony hasn't woken up by then and had you chained down until you are fully healthy."

I moaned, slipping back onto my bed. We couldn't wait that long. Especially if Velvet Remedy did decide to chain me down until I got better. Something Velvet was more than capable of. Xenith might not realize that, but then the zebra wasn't there when Velvet shot me.

"I can recover on the ride to Splendid Valley," I told her, recalling having said something similar to Velvet Remedy after Arbu. But the mere thought of riding in the *Sky Bandit* made my head whimper and my stomach twist unpleasantly. "Okay… once I can hold food." I wasn't going to subject the others to a ride in the passenger wagon with me while I spent the whole trip with my head in a bucket.

My mind wandered a moment, trying to retrace the days. How long ago had Velvet Remedy shot me with my poisoned dart gun? How long since I had left Stable Two? My whole life was condensed into… what, eight weeks? Over a month and a half, not quite two months. The equally miserable little pony in my head pointed out that between now and SteelHooves' shack, I'd used up all my sick days, and soon the master PipBuck Technician would have to dock my allowance. I found myself giggling.

"Laughter," Xenith mused. "A sure sign of regaining health. Or slipping into insanity."

That just made me giggle harder for no good reason.

Xenith got up, taking the mop bucket's handle by her teeth. The stench from it had begun to permeate the room. I felt simultaneously thankful towards her and embarrassed at my disgusting frailty. I was sorry to be the reason she had to do something so unpleasant.

My might caught on something as she started towards the filthy curtain. "Xenith, how is your daughter? And… have you told her yet?"

The zebra stopped. She set down the bucket of vomit and turned to me. "Xephyr is doing well. She is the doctor for these townsfolk, and plies her craft well. She is very thankful for what we have done here."

Xenith sat down, staring off into the air. "She and the others of her village have released me from my responsibility, so I am free to go." She looked at me sternly, "As to your second question: no. And I wish that you would not tell her."

I nodded. "But… shouldn't she know? And, Xenith, you deserve to be reunited with her."

Xenith smiled sadly. "She is her own mare now, not the little girl I knew. I would rather she keep that strength than submit to being my child again." She looked away again. "And, to be truthful, I cannot be responsible for her. I do not know how. Plus, you need me. More than she does."

With that, Xenith stood back up, taking the mop bucket once again, and walked out, the curtain waving in her passing.

I laid there for some time, unsure how to feel. Part of me was happy that Xenith would be with us again. Another part of me, the part which deeply wished for a happy ending for my friends, was softly crying. I wasn't even sure why. My own mother, as much as I loved her from a distance, was not as important to me as my friends; and I would not wish to sacrifice my time with them or the good I was trying to do for a reunion with her. So why did my heart desire for Xenith and Xephyr to be together?

I shivered again. Part of me wanted to pull down the disgusting curtain and wrap myself in it. But a better part of me shuddered at the thought. And I knew that, if I did, I would just become too hot again. Instead, I curled up. A wave of weariness pass over me.

We needed Xenith. I needed her. We were stronger together. Better.

I would need my friends. Soon… as soon as I was well enough to function… we would be enacting my plan, whatever that was, to deal with the Goddess.

I moaned as another shiver quaked through my body. Suddenly, I felt nervous. Scared. I was about to risk our lives with a plan I didn't even know. I was trusting myself… which was beginning to feel awfully stupid. They all trusted me, but why should they? I hadn't told them what I was doing, just their specific parts. No one knew what we were doing! This was insane!

I've got a plan for dealing with the Goddess. I've told everypony their parts, and just *their parts. I'm the only pony who knows all of it.*

And then I took that knowledge from myself and locked it away in orbs sitting far away in Tenpony Tower. What was I thinking? Literally, what was I thinking?

I've told everypony their parts, and just *their parts.*

Every *pony…*

Oh!

…because the Goddess couldn't read zebra minds.

A smile broke across my muzzle. Ooooh, I *was* a clever pony!

* * *

"She did what?!" Calamity gasped, startling me from the near-sleep my aching body had fallen into. "Dammit, Li'lpip *promised* me…"

Oh no. What did I do? I immediately felt awful for whatever I had done to upset Calamity.

"Calm yourself," SteelHooves commanded softly. "Everything was fine." Was SteelHooves mobile yet? It didn't sound like he had moved. The idea that he might *still* be paralyzed within his armor was horrible. I thought of how he had been trapped helpless under the water and prayed to Celestia and Luna that he had been pulled out quickly.

"Fine? Ah was gone, you were immobile and Li'lpip goes pokin' her head inta a whole heapin' mess o' memory orbs right in the middle o' the Canterlot Ruins?" Calamity roared. "Dammit! Ah know that mare ain't got no sense at all, sometimes, but Ah expected her t' treat a promise better! What did she expect Velvet t' do if y'all were attacked? Or if the Cloud got in?"

"Turn on the shield," SteelHooves said simply.

Calamity stopped mid-rant. "What now?"

"We were inside the Ministry of Awesome, within the shielded zone. If anything happened, Velvet Remedy could have protected us with the throw of a switch," SteelHooves informed him, adding the jab, "Or don't you trust Rainbow Dash's defenses?"

I could hear Calamity let out a defeated sigh. "Fine. Okay."

"She's not responsible for Velvet Remedy's condition," SteelHooves added. "In fact, she risked drowning to save her."

"Ah know that. An' Ah'm not mad at her cuz o'… hell, Ah'm not mad at her. Ah'm just mad," Calamity admitted. "Feels better than bein' worried sick."

I heard a crack of wood and dust shifted down from between the ceiling boards as the small building shook from Calamity's kick.

I could understand the sentiment.

"Hell o' a time t' let everypony down, Calamity." What?

"I seem to recall you saved them." My thoughts echoed SteelHooves's sentiment. Calamity had caught us. And then he saved Velvet when I couldn't.

"Yeah, well they wouldn't 'ave needed so much savin' if Ah had jus' flown us outta there. Muh fault we ended up in the moat. Hell, Ah don't even remember touchin' down."

"Calamity!" I called out weakly. "Stop. Just… Not your fault…" That was all I had the energy to shout, and it left me panting.

The orange-maned pegasus poked his head through the curtain, hovering a pony's height off the floor. "Li'lpip? Ah'm sorry. Ah thought ya were asleep."

Part of me regretted letting him see me like this. I was drenched in sweat. My coat was matted to my skin beneath. I hadn't bathed since being dropped in the mud.

I shook my head, then weakly hoof-waved him in. The pegasus landed to pass through the doorway, stepping up to the old, stained mattress that served as my bed. "C'n Ah getcha anything? Water? A blanket?" He frowned. "Not sure we got any o' those. An' the water here ain't 'xactly the best neither."

I wanted both. But I asked for neither. "Calamity, thank you," I said, smiling as best I could. "Velvet and I both owe you our lives. You were… awesome."

He shook his head. "Thanks all the same fer sayin', but…"

"But nothing. It… it's been… hard and hurtful on all of us. Sometimes, I just want to stop…" I trailed off, ashamed. I felt like I wanted to stop a lot lately.

"Ah know whatcha mean. A lesser pony woulda called it quits a long time ago." Calamity laid down next to me. He pulled out the pink gem and set it between us.

"Thank ya fer this, Li'lpip. Ah got right messed up in the head after Bucklyn Cross. Ah hate what happened there, an it was sendin' muh mind inta dark places. Ya gave me somethin' t' remind me that we are the good guys. We don't always get it right. Hell, sometimes we mess it up real bad. But we keep tryin' and there are folk better off thanks t' us."

I nodded, staring into the gem.

"I hate this plan of yours," Calamity told me bluntly. "Once again, yer going inta someplace insanely dangerous alone. An' once again yer the only one who c'n do it. I hate that."

I'm… going in alone? The idea of going into Maripony (or worse, all of Splendid Valley!) alone terrified me. I no longer liked this plan either.

On the other hoof, it didn't surprise me. I knew myself too well. Any chance to spare my friends the danger, any way I could make it my burden alone, and I would take it. I had done it again.

"Y'all remember what that place did t' us last time?" Calamity reminded me. "An' we were together then."

"Calamity?" I asked, worried now. "What can you tell me about the plan?"

Calamity blinked. His eyes widened as he realized what I was asking. "What? Y'all don't know? Ah mean, Ah know that ya had yer memories removed, but ya really don't know *nothin'* 'bout the plan?" Now he was beginning to panic. "Didn'tcha even leave yerself any notes?"

Notes? "Where would I…?" I stopped. Dammit, of course! My PipBuck! How could I have not thought of that before?

Slowly, I lifted my right foreleg, my gaze sliding to the dead screen of my PipBuck.

"um… Calamity, you rebooted SteelHooves's armor, right? Is he able to move again?" I felt supremely stupid and foalish.

Calamity winced. "Ah, actually, no." My eyes widened. SteelHooves had been immobile this whole time? "Turns out, it ain't as easy as it looks. Ah ain't a certified PipBuck Technician an' Toaster Repairpony after all."

"Then…" I started to pull myself off the mattress, determined that SteelHooves not remain paralyzed a moment longer. My forelegs trembled and my stomach shot me a queasy warning. I looked around, but the mop bucket wasn't back yet. I laid back down, putting a hoof over my muzzle and tried to force my insides still.

"…could you bring him in here, please?" My head was swimming again. Trying to remember just what I needed to do was like slogging through belly-deep sludge. I needed tools, the spell matrix master key and something to reboot him from. "And could you please fetch my utility barding and… you borrowed magically powered armor from somepony?"

"Ah'll do muh best," Calamity said, looking chagrinned. "He's… kinda heavy."

I nodded, wondering how they got SteelHooves inside in the first place. Or out of the water. My eyes widened as I remembered something else. "There was a shot!"

Calamity started, jumping up and looking around, "Where? Ya sure? Ah didn't hear nothin'."

I shook my head, whimpering slightly at how sick the sudden movement made me feel. "No… before. At the lake. You shot… something."

Calamity visibly relaxed. "Oh. That shot. Ah was catchin' the griffin's attention. 'Parently, some folks tend t' notice when a passenger wagon falls outta Canterlot."

* * *

SteelHooves sat silently by my side. I was feverish and having trouble focusing, but I was finished. I started disconnecting my PipBuck from his armor, glancing once more at the set of badly damaged power armor laying in the corner.

"I'm sorry," I told him, wiping a sick coat of sweat from my face. "We should have had you moving faster." I felt so tired.

SteelHooves said nothing, but it wasn't a damning silence. His tail shifted. I pulled my tools away. "Done." I cast another look at the armor Calamity had rented for this and winced. Sometimes, things were just unfair.

It was Steel Ranger armor, torn up but with a still functional spell matrix that I had been able to use to restore my PipBuck (and then use my PipBuck to restore SteelHooves). There was still traces of pony blood on it. I had chosen to restore my PipBuck first not merely because it was easier, but because I felt SteelHooves would rather not be connected directly to the other armor.

The magically powered armor had been taken from the body of one of the Rangers we had killed in Stable Two. From the damage, it was a pony whom SteelHooves had put down himself.

SteelHooves stood up. He tested each leg, then stretched. "Thank you," he said solemnly. "Now rest."

I curled up, part of me hating that he saw this but unable to properly care. I really wanted nothing more than to sleep… and hopefully not dream.

I watched him as he turned towards the doorway. He would just walk out as if everything was concluded. But it wasn't.

"Applesnack…" I whispered but I knew he heard it by the way he stopped. I wasn't sure if this was what I should do, but… no more secrets. "I saw you."

"You see me often."

"In one of the orbs… in the Ministry," I told him. "It was the memory of a guard… he was assisting Zecora on a mission… to help get her closer to Caesar…"

SteelHooves said nothing, but the temperature in the room seemed to drop.

"You… were going to propose… to Applejack that night." I looked at him, my heart squeezing in my chest. "I'm so sorry."

"Closer to Caesar," SteelHooves repeated. "To do what?"

I closed my eyes. "I don't know. Spy on him, I think."

"Or assassinate him."

I shook, feeling a chill that was more from sickness than reaction to his words. "I… don't know… but I don't think so." I wasn't sure why – maybe it was the way Zecora had worried about pony deaths, or how her inexpert fighting skills caused her to likely kill my host by accident – but I just didn't feel like Zecora was that kind of killer. I cringed as I realized I was. "She was a spy."

Simmer down, sallie. Zecora ain't no spy!

The world was filled with sharp-edged irony.

SteelHooves stood there, as unmoving as he had been all day. Finally, he said, "It wouldn't have mattered. Killing the Caesar wouldn't have stopped the war. The legatus legionis would have simply stepped in. And, if anything, he was worse."

I swallowed, my mouth tasting filthy. "SteelHooves… Applesnack, I'm not judging you. I'm saying…" What was I saying? I fought for words. "I'm saying I understand now. I know what you meant when you said I made it easier for you to live with yourself. And… I'm sorry."

He nickered.

"Applejack never knew the truth about Zecora either," I told him. "And she loved you. She tried to fight for your relationship because she loved you. And, I think, because she understood." Not approved. But understood.

SteelHooves walked out.

* * *

I was trapped. Buried alive. Encased in a coffin of metal. There was no air. I couldn't breathe.

Sounds… horrible, horrible sounds came at me out of the darkess. Warping, unearthly tones. Rending sounds. The sounds of saws.

I tried to back away, but there was no room. My backside hit a smooth surface, not metal but glass, and I felt a shock of cold. My hooves splashed into the sticky warmth of blood. I could smell the sick, coppery stench. My healing booth coffin was filling with it.

You cut a bloody swath through them. How many ponies are dead tonight because of you, Littlepip? Velvet Remedy's voice echoed accusingly, provoking a sickening déjà vu. *How many ponies have you slaughtered?*

The blood was the blood of Arbu.

It sure didn't take you long to become a mass murderer, did it, Littlepip?

The sound of the saw was getting closer. It intended to cut me apart with ragged teeth. To slice open my head and take my brain.

Strange symbols appeared, floating in front of me. Alien glyphs of ancient zebra design. But unlike the sounds and voices and darkness, their pulsing lines of crimson and black were soothing. They shifted in odd dimensions, offering to unlock themselves. To protect me.

I knew these and they were blasphemous. I turned away…

…I was facing the mirror. I stared back at myself, bleeding, dying. Littlepip the raider. My expression was grim, hateful. The stream of blood was pouring out of the mirror, the blood of Arbu coming from my body, mixing with my own.

The saw was getting closer. I could feel the wind from its gnarled, spinning teeth blasting my mane. It was going to cut out my heart. Rip me open and wrench out my spine. It would hurt. Hurt so badly. But I wouldn't be allowed to die.

Let us help you, the glyphs whispered. *You have no power. You have no purpose. Let us give you purpose.*

"I have a purpose!" I shouted at the raider-Littlepip in the mirror.

I'm not the Wasteland Savior, Homage, I heard myself saying. *You are. You and them. I'm just the one who clears the way.*

You could be the savoir, the glyphs whispered, floating in the air around the mirror. I realized I could almost understand them.

Let me show you secrets!

"I don't want your secrets!" I shouted at the glyphs, but I was lying. I'd seen the blackness that the Book held, the horror. But…

You've seen how much good we can do in the hooves of the right pony. You cannot deny.

"I…" I whimpered, faltering. I knew that was true. Even the blackest magic could be used for good. But… "I'm no Rarity. I'm weak."

I could make you stronger. Better.

"D…don't…"

My gaze locked on the raider in my soul. She trembled, dying from blood loss. She was grotesque, horrible.

"I'm not this!" I cried out. "I have a purpose!"

It… it's not us, is it? I heard my voice cry. *We're not the right group of friends. We can't bring Equestria back.*

No, Spike's voice laughed at me. *You're not!*

The saw was so close now. If I didn't take the glyphs for protection, it would start cutting me.

Let me show you so many secrets!

"NO!" I screamed, crying. I wanted those secrets. I tried to fight, but I really, really wanted them.

The saw was gone. The noises stopped. The healing booth was no longer a coffin and I was no longer alone.

"Enough of this," Rarity said, stepping forward. She glared at the glyphs. "You leave her alone."

When…? How?

The beautiful white unicorn gave me a sad frown. "I was not that strong either." She stared back at the glyphs as the other Ministry Mares walked up from the darkness behind me. "The Black Book preys on you when you're weak and alone. But you're not alone anymore."

"I'm… how?"

"Cuz ya brought us together, didn'tcha?" Applejack smiled. "It's what you do."

I think I know who you're looking for, I remembered telling Spike.

“It’s happening differently this time, isn’t it?” Twilight Sparkle’s voice was curious.

“Well duh,” Rainbow Dash hovered over her. “Do you think it was the same when it was just Celestia? Same is boring.”

“Ah reckon it’s diff’rent every time.”

I was confused yet comforted. I didn’t know how, but they were with me. And with them, I had the strength to refuse and fight.

But you don’t want to fight, do you? Let me give you a taste of what I have to offer.

“Hey Pinkie, this is a great party, but I’ve got something that will make it even better,” Pinkie Pie said dourly, her expression cross. She was staring at the floating runes, but I didn’t think she was seeing quite what the rest of us were. “You’ve got to try these. Just take one. They’ll blow your mind.” Her hoof stomped.

Another voice echoed out of the darkness.

Have you given up your principles for the greater good yet? Red Eye asked. *I see you’ve already become a monster. Or did you think I wouldn’t hear about Arbu?* The blood began to rise.

“Ah don’t like this feller,” Applejack hissed.

And look at that, Red Eye’s voice mocked as I felt a burning in my right foreleg where my PipBuck had merged with my flesh. *You’re becoming more like me every day!*

“I’m not like you,” I asserted, lying again. “And I’m not a monster.” I knew I was. I could see it in the mirror.

“CORRUPTED KINDESS!” Trixie’s voice accused triumphantly, her image floating above the mirror.

Fluttershy stepped forward, “How would you know?”

“I’M THE GODDESS! I KNOW EVERYTHING!”

“Hush now,” Fluttershy commanded, Staring. “Quiet now.”

The image of Trixie faded, looking abashed.

Power, the Black Book cajoled. *Purpose. Together, we will unlock the world!*

“Don’t listen to it,” Rarity strengthened.

Applejack rested a hoof on my shoulder. “Ya already got a purpose. Yer the Bringer o’ Light, ain’tcha?”

“I… I don’t even know what that means.” I shook my head. “I *don’t* have a purpose! I’m lost. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Now listen here,” Applejack said sternly. “What Ah’m tellin’ ya is the honest truth. Ya *do* have a purpose.”

“Yer the one that brought ’em together,” she said as images of my friends floated at the edges of my vision. My living friends. Calamity. Velvet Remedy. SteelHooves. Xenith. Even Pyrelight. They were here with me too.

I felt tears.

“Ya find the good ones. Draw ’em out. Clear the path an’ light the way,” Applejack smiled gently. “There’s a name fer that, y’know.”

I wanted to believe her so badly that I was trembling.

“But…” I turned back at the mirror. To the shot up, bleeding, dying Littlepip in cobbled-together, gore-stained raider armor, barely standing as she faced down her next kill, Little Macintosh floating in front of her, pointing upward. “…but this is my soul. Isn’t it?”

"Of course it is, silly," Pinkie Pie said, hugging me suddenly and pointing at the mirror. "You're just looking at it wrong."

"Look behind you."

* * *

I awoke with a gasp, sitting up suddenly. Then collapsed back onto the mattress. I felt awful, damp with sweat and caked with mud. Filthy. Almost too tired to move. My mane was clumped and stringy. But the nausea was gone and my fever had broken.

I was not alone in the room. "Xenith?"

The zebra who moved closer wasn't my companion. "Xephyr," I said, recognizing her. "Where is everypony? …I mean everyone?"

Xephyr pulled a wet sponge from a tin pot filled with water. "Your other friend woke up an hour ago," she told me as she began to wipe my forehead. "They are all with her right now."

I wished I could be too.

"Xenith is my mother, isn't she?" Xephyr asked. I froze, unsure how to answer. Xenith had asked me not to, and I wanted to do right by her. But if Xephyr already suspected…

"I thought so," Xephyr said as she continued to sponge me down, removing some of the illness sweat from my coat. "She has tried to hide it, but how many zebra mares named Xenith does she think this wasteland holds?"

Smart girl. I shivered a little under the cool dampness of the sponge, but was immensely thankful for every stroke of it. I wanted a bath so much it hurt. I would have given my left forehoof for a day at the Tenpony spa.

"You will be going soon," Xephyr gleaned. "You will be taking her with you."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"I will be happy to see her go," the young zebra mare told me bluntly. "I am not ungrateful for all she has done, but she would not have done it if you had not led her."

I winced. "No, that's not true!"

"Yes, it is," Xephyr said, accepting no argument. "I love her… from a distance." I felt an odd chill as the zebra's words echoed my thoughts from the evening before. "But she is not her own mare, and she never will be. I will not be like her."

Xephyr continued to sponge-bathe me in silence.

"Your father…?" I began to ask.

"My father," the young zebra said bitterly, "Was Qarl Death-Hoof, leader of our parent's tribe until that slaver griffin killed him." Stern. I was sure of it.

"I was just a little foal, but I remember how he treated mother. And how he ran the tribe. I am not sorry he is dead."

* * *

I knew I shouldn't be moving. My body wanted nothing but more rest. But I had to see Velvet Remedy. And I didn't want to go back to sleep. There were things waiting for me in my dreams, and not all of them meant me well.

The ramshackle shack (it would be generous to call it a building) was Glyphmark's attempt at a clinic, and possibly the largest old house in town. The floors were broken, the roof was sagging, but it housed all of us. Velvet Remedy was being kept in what had once been a bathroom. The old tub, waterstained in brown with traces of pink, was the only intact object in the room full of debris and shattered porcelain.

"Ah thought Ah'd lost ya," Calamity was saying as I approached. I stopped, backing out of sight, not wanting to interrupt. My legs cried out that this was a good time to lay down, or at least lean against something. They were weary and tired of bearing my weight, and if I refused to sleep, the least I could do was get off them.

"Now you know how I feel every time you go off and do something reckless," Velvet replied without malice.

"Ah… I don't think Ah could take this anymore without ya," Calamity told her. "Ah'm strugglin' here, Velvet. It feels like all muh friends are fallin' apart, and Ah'm tryin' t' be the strong one. But Ah ain't doin' so good."

I remembered what I had heard Calamity mutter to himself as we entered Stable Two: *Ah gotta be strong fer them. Not go crazy. Ah can't jus' charge in an' kill every armored bitch Ah see. Ah need t' be strong. Need t' watch fer them. Need t' protect 'em. Ah c'n do this."*

"What's wrong, love?" Velvet asked gently. "What's eating you?"

"Bucklyn Cross." I winced. "Ah've tried t' make peace with it, but…"

"Come closer," Velvet said in response. "Let me hold you."

I could hear Calamity's throat hitch. "We were bullies, Velve. Nothin' better than bullies. We went in demandin' somethin' that we knew they wouldn't want to give, an' it all ended in blood. Those young knights didn't deserve t' die." My friend was crying now. I felt a lump in my throat. My heart twisted in knots. "Ah shoulda stopped us. Ah knew better. An' that makes it muh fault."

"Hush now, love," Velvet cooed. She knew there wasn't anything she could say, so she wisely said nothing. I imagined she was holding him as he cried into her mane.

"An' Ah'm terrified that Ah'm losin' ya too," Calamity said brokenly.

"What? No, love," Velvet soothed. "You're not losing me."

"That crap ya pulled in the Ministry o' Peace says different," Calamity asserted. There was strength in his voice. I could tell he had pulled back from her. "No… no, don't say anythin'. Ah understand why ya did it now, Ah guess. But yer too wrapped up in Fluttershy. Ain't right nor healthy, puttin' all yer faith in a pony ya hardly know."

"I know Fluttershy," Velvet insisted softly.

"Yeah, but there are things ya don't know," Calamity replied and all sorts of alarm bells started going off in my head.

"Oh?" Velvet asked, and I swore the question sounded like poison. "Like what?"

Calamity faltered. "Well… Ah don't rightly know. But Li'lpip's seen things in those orbs, and…" I could hear from the timbre of his voice that he knew the hole he was digging. So he changed tack. "Jus' remember what DJ Pon3 always says is the one big truth o' the wasteland? We all done things that we regret. An', well, sounds t' me like Fluttershy had some regrets too."

"And Littlepip is keeping what she knows secret, isn't she? To protect me, no doubt." Velvet hissed out a sigh. I guessed that Calamity had nodded. "What a surprise. Littlepip keeping secrets from her friends. I swear, if there was an Element of Frustration…"

"Velvet, please," Calamity said softly. "Don't be mad. She means well, really."

"And do you think she's right? Do you think I need to be protected from whatever this is?"

"I dunno," Calamity struggled. "After the Ministry o' Peace? Maybe." He found more solid ground as he told her, "Ah just know ya shouldn't get so wrapped up in tryin' t' be yer idol." I had a sudden flash of Pinkie Bell, and I bet Velvet Remedy did too. "Yer a wonderful, lovin', carin' pony all on yer own. Jus' be yerself."

* * *

I slipped out the front door, not wanting to interrupt the quiet moment Calamity and Velvet Remedy were sharing. I blinked in the odd daylight, once again recalling how strange the air seemed without the healing light of the sun.

Ditzy Doo waved at me.

I blinked again, taking in the sight of Ditzy Doo's delivery wagon. (*Absolutely Everything!* "Yes, I do deliveries!") She'd picked up a new companion, I noticed. A griffin bodyguard in Talon armor.

Now I knew who Calamity had rented the Steel Ranger armor from. And which griffin he'd been signaling. Xenith had given Glyphmark a buck to the town's economy, and Ditzy Doo had taken only days to start trade with them. That was… amazingly fast for word to have gotten out. I suspected a little of Homage's hoofwork.

A little lavender filly with a blonde mane trotted up to me. She was smiling, a piece of parchment in her mouth. "Here, Miss Littlepip," Silver Bell said, her voice almost singing. "I painted a picture for you. See, it's you and Homage."

I floated the parchment up and gazed at the painting. It was a crude child's painting… and it was the most beautiful picture I had ever seen.

"Aw… you're crying? Don't you like it? I tried really hard!"

"I… I love it!" I knelt down and hugged the filly gently. I wondered what I had done to deserve such an innocent and wonderful gift? With deep shame, I remembered that I had once intended to steal from this little filly. "Thank you, Silver Bell!"

Ditzy Doo had trotted up beside us. As I let Silver Bell go, I noticed that Ditzy had a couple of little chalkboards dangling around her neck. She set one of them down, pulling out a piece of chalk, and scribbled "Hello!"

"Hello, Ditzy Doo," I replied, floating the picture up next to me. I would have to find something waterproof to keep it in until we returned to Junction R-7, where I intended to put it up in a cherished place right next to my bed. Silver Bell had somehow really captured Homage and made her look absolutely adorable.

Ditzy Doo erased the board with a hoof, then wrote, "Can a horn grow back?" She looked at me with an urgent smile, right eye rolling upwards disturbingly.

I blinked. "I… I don't know." I thought about it some more. "A horn is a bone, right?"

Minutes later, Velvet Remedy was kneeling next to Silver Bell, the older mare's horn glowing as Ditzy Doo, Calamity and I watched.

"Now I've gotten a lot better at this spell," Velvet cautioned, snarkily adding, "Thanks to an abundance of practice. But all I can do is help the physical horn grow back. I do not know if her magic will heal, or how long it might take."

"Thank you, Miss Velvet Remedy," Silver Bell chimed softly, understanding. Her eyes drifted to Pyrelight, widening along with her smile.

The majestic balefire phoenix began to sing to Silver Bell. Her song was rich, sadly nostalgic and overwhelmingly beautiful.

Velvet Remedy smiled gently and stretched out her magic. The scar on Silver Bell's head where she had cut off her own horn began to glow.

* * *

"What do you think will happen to Silver Bell?" I asked Velvet as the Sky Bandit pushed its way through the smoke-yellowed sky.

"I truly don't know," Velvet replied, giving a polite cough. "I hope, with her horn reformed, that her magic will swiftly return. But the wasteland has never seemed that forgiving." She coughed again, and I found myself joining her.

We were skirting the edge of the forest, heading towards Splendid Valley by way of Ponyville. The fires of Everfree Forest were choking the air in every direction around it. The forest had been burning for over a week now; it was consumed in flames and a thick fog of smoke, but from what I could see, it seemed absurdly intact.

"Damn, ya'd think the whole place would be ash by now," Calamity called out, flying low to keep us out of the thicker smoke. "Hey, Pyrelight, y' sure this ain't a phoenix forest?"

Pyrelight let out a derisive hoot.

Our attention was snatched by the sound of a gunshot. It was rapidly followed by several more.

Calamity diverted towards the sound, and soon we came upon a gunfight. Two groups were battling between the cover of rocks and what looked like the charred corpse of a river serpent.

"Looks like raiders!" Calamity called back.

Raiders? Seriously? I'd already wiped out the raiders in Ponyville. What did they do, respawn?

"Who are they attacking?" I asked, bringing up my E.F.S. and trying to get a fix on both groups though the haze.

"Other raiders… I think." Calamity banked and I got a better look. Sure enough, three younger raiders seemed to be holding out against four older ones. Neither side had lost a pony yet, but one of the two bucks in the younger group had taken a shot to the leg and was bleeding badly. I was mildly surprised that Calamity hadn't started shooting yet.

"Shouldn't we help?" Velvet Remedy asked, moving to the window next to me.

"Help who?" Calamity questioned. "Ah ain't sure who the good guys are here, if anypony. An' Ah'm… feeling a bit gunshy after… recent events. Don't wanna start shootin' at the wrong folk."

Velvet Remedy gave an exaggerated sigh. "There are more ways than that to help." She waved her horn as it began to glow. Below us, Velvet Remedy's shield began to snake between the two groups of fighters.

"Excuse me," Velvet's magically amplified voice rang out. **"Could you please lower your weapons for a moment and tell me why are you fighting?"**

"What the hell?" One of the older raiders responded by tipping up the muzzle of his rifle and taking a shot at Velvet Remedy. The bullet struck the now-armored wall of our passenger wagon.

"Wrong," Velvet informed him. Magic burst from her horn, striking him with her anesthetic spell. The raider buck toppled, paralyzed. **"Let's try that again."**

I had floated out my zebra rifle (thinking I really needed a weapon that used more common ammunition and did not set ponies horrifically on fire), and was holding myself in reserve. Calamity and I exchanged glances as we let Velvet Remedy's tactic play out.

"Do ya have a death wish or somethin'?" one of the other older raiders shouted out. "Are ya out of yer fuckin' mind?"

More shots rang out. Both sides were still trying to shoot at each other through Velvet's shield. Neither was having any luck.

"They're raiders!" one of the younger bucks shouted up at us. "They wiped out The Republic!"

"They wiped out the what now?" I asked, confused.

"Little town up north o' here," Calamity informed us. "Ah protected a few caravans travelin' 'tween it an' New Appleloosa. Bizarrre, cult-like group o' weirdoes, but not bad ponies. Certainly didn't deserve t' be slaughtered."

"And who are you?" Velvet asked.

"Whoa!" Calamity shouted as one of the larger group hurled a home-made explosive at the *Sky Bandit.* I caught it in my telekinesis, pulling Velvet out of the window as the bomb exploded in the air, sending shards of glass and nails in every direction. SteelHooves stepped between Xenith and the window, his armor deflecting the shrapnel that found its way inside. I heard Calamity bite back a cry of pain as a nail tore through one of his wings. His barding and the *Sky Bandit* protected him from the rest.

"We're heroes!" the younger mare in her group of three yelled up at us as the two bucks next to her reloaded.

"You look like raiders," Velvet Remedy pointed out cautiously.

"What?" one of the younger bucks cried out in surprise. "Oh, the barding?" I blinked, feeling my life had somehow come full circle.

"Okay," I called out, moving back into the window and aiming the zebra rifle. One of the raiders shot at us again, missing the entire *Sky Bandit.*

"Ya sure, Li'lpip? We don't know…"

"We know one side is shooting at us," SteelHooves pointed out impatiently, opening the door of the passenger wagon as the missile launcher opened on his battle saddle.

"Fuck!" somepony shouted from below. "It's one of those outcast rangers!"

Whoooooooooosh!

SteelHooves' missiles shot out. One hit Velvet Remedy's shield which collapsed in the fiery blast. The other plowed through the fire and struck the ground at the hooves of the older raiders in an explosion of bloody meat. Two managed to dive to safey, but their fellow raiders were bloody, smoldering giblets.

The two survivors turned their attention fully towards us. One of them pulled out another home-made grenade. I prepared to grab it with my magic…

Let me give you a taste of what I have to offer.

…I suddenly understood. The spell was so simple. It was barely more than telekinesis.

The easiest thing, really. My horn began to glow.

The splattered blood from the torn raider chunks began to flow together, pooling, lifting.

I realized this was the first spell, the little teaser offered to anypony who might be…

…be what? Fitting? Worthy? Weak enough?

Now just form the blade.

(Be Unwavering!)

"No!" I shouted, my scream simultaneous with the raider's throw. The blood splashed back to the ground, seeping into the soil. Velvet Remedy threw another shield up, this time between us and the raiders, deflecting the bomb. It exploded, sending its shrapnel into the shield.

No! I was shaking; cold sweat had broken over me. But I had refused. I would rather be a one-trick-pony than have a spell like that.

⁂

"I've never seen a zebra before." The olive buck walked around Xenith as she watched him apprehensively. "I mean, not a real one. You don't look like the ones in the pictures." He tilted his head, brushing a wisp of eggplant-colored mane from his face. "Can your eyes really glow?"

SteelHooves had made short work of the battle and we had landed. Velvet Remedy was tending to the wounded buck, and Calamity was talking to the group's mare who had recognized the pegasus from tales of his caravan protecting. Her eagerness to chat with him about hunting raiders had convinced him we had aided the correct side. We had yet to trade names.

"Haven't you heard about the Wasteland Heroine?" the younger mare in scavenged raider armor said excitedly. "She and her friends swoop in and save the day, shooting the bad guys and monsters dead. *Pow, pow, pow!"* The amber mare's magenta eyes were wide and she was nearly squealing. "We're going to be just. Like. *Her!"*

My ears fell back. I cringed a little inside, happy I was not wearing my Stable barding anymore. Calamity was looking at me, a hoof to his muzzle, snickering. Dammit, why was he snickering?

"Are you sure she'd want you putting yourself at risk hunting raiders?" Velvet Remedy asked carefully as she wrapped the buck's hindleg in healing bandages. "I'm sure the *Wasteland Heroine* wouldn't want you getting hurt."

The way she massaged the name made me flush with embarrassment. The radio was bad enough. I took a step back behind SteelHooves, my ears burning.

"Oh no," her patient insisted, a khaki-coated pony with a vanilla-colored mane said. "But she wants us to help make Equestria better. DJ Pon3 says we all need to learn from her example."

"She can't be everywhere at once," the olive-coated second buck explained. "It's up to the rest of us to be brave and step up, helping fight the good fight."

This was too much. I never deserved my reputation, but after Arbu… this was unbearable. Why should any pony idolize me? I wanted to bury myself in a hole somewhere until this was over.

“You are a lifesaver,” the khaki-coated buck told Velvet Remedy as she finished binding his wound. “If anything, the Equestrian Wasteland needs more ponies like *you.*”

Velvet blinked in surprise. “Why… thank you!” she breathed.

“Hey,” the buck exclaimed, his eyes widening as he stared at Velvet Remedy. “You sound kinda like that gal on the radio! The one who sings the new songs.”

Pyrelight landed on Velvet’s tail and sang out a musical note. Velvet Remedy blushed. “You have a good ear.” At least she was used to having fans.

“Wow,” olive buck said, staring at SteelHooves. “Are you really one of those renegade Steel Ranger heroes?”

SteelHooves whinnied. “I am.”

“That is *so* cool!”

“An’ so yer huntin’ raiders?” Calamity asked, sounding impressed.

“Yep! We’re on a rescue mission!” the enthusiastic amber mare said. A scowl broke over her face. “These raiders murdered every adult in The Republic and took the fillies and colts back to their fort. I guess they wanted to keep them for themselves. We’re going in after them.”

“Probably wanted playthings,” the khaki buck snorted, his voice filled with loathing.

Calamity bristled. Velvet Remedy gasped, “They did *what?*”

“Where is this fort?” I asked, stepping forward, my personal embarrassment forgotten.

The olive-coated buck pointed a hoof. “There’s an old hut on the far side of Ponyville, right up next to the Everfree Forest.” Dammit! I thought I had cleared Ponyville of raiders. This place must have been far enough out that I missed it. “They’ve turned it into the center of a small compound.”

“How many?” SteelHooves asked.

“About twelve. Minus these four, so eight. But they have guns and dogs.”

Xenith looked at me. “No more distractions?” she asked calmly. I bit my lower lip.

SteelHooves neighed, “The rest of you can go ahead if you wish, but Applejack would not want her rangers to ignore a cry for help.” The three younger ponies were staring at us.

I nodded. “The Goddess will just have to wait another hour or two.” We had a chance to help, and I wasn’t going to turn my back. No distractions be damned.

⁂

Velvet Remedy was trembling. “That’s…”

I nodded. I wasn’t surprised now that I had missed this raider group. The cottage that they had built their compound around really was a bit removed from the rest of town. It was surrounded by a large fence of rust and razor-wire, and sharpened poles impaling the heads of rabbits, squirrels and other small animals. Sickly, poisoned trees twisted up from the barren ground, providing support for snipers nests. Dead birds hung from their branches, strung together like windchimes. A small river slogged through the property coming out of the Everfree Forest, the water grey with ash. Inside the fence were kennels, some of which were used for the angry, malnourished guard dogs that roamed about inside. As for the other kennels… through my binoculars, I could see the mangled body of a pony in one of them.

"…Fluttershy's cottage," SteelHooves confirmed.

The fence on the far side of the cottage lay in broken ruin, several trees on that side had been uprooted and a few kennels had been crushed flat. It looked like something huge had lumbered out of the Everfree Forest, barely noticing what it stepped on. A couple raider ponies were standing over the wreckage, poking at it, while a third was keeping the dogs from escaping with a shield spell much like Velvet's.

I passed the binoculars to Calamity. "Could you give us a fly-over? Make sure there's nothing we are missing?" The pegasus took off his hat, threw the binoculars' strap around his neck and kicked his hat back onto his head.

"Gotcha, Li'lpip. One aerial recon, comin' up."

The amber mare stared as Calamity stretched out his wings and flew. "Pegasuses are cool."

"Pegasi," Velvet Remedy corrected automatically.

"Yeah. Those too."

"We should split up," SteelHooves recommended. "Hit the main hut and the yard simultaneously. Keep them divided."

I agreed. "You should go with these ponies and take the ones in the yard. Xenith can free any captives and get them to safety while you four take out the…"

"Three," Velvet interrupted. "You're not sending this buck into battle with a wounded leg," she scolded. "Especially when he might have to evade dogs."

I frowned and nodded. "You're right. I wasn't thinking." The fact that *I* regularly charged into combat wounded didn't mean it was smart. Especially since this little group of wanna-be heroes didn't have a Velvet Remedy of their own.

I looked to SteelHooves, "It looks like most of the foals must be inside the cottage. Calamity and I will sneak in and take them out." I looked to Velvet. "I would like you right behind us with your shield spell ready. I don't want any of the kids caught in crossfire." She nodded primly.

"Wait," the khaki buck said. "You're taking her in with you? Are you insane?"

Velvet Remedy gave him a questioning scowl. "I'm not helpless."

"You're a healer! You should be protected. Kept out of combat." I understood his logic. The loss of Velvet Remedy was the loss of not just one pony, but countless.

Velvet huffed. "Why not put me in a pretty little cage then?"

Calamity landed before an argument could break out. "Three raiders in the yard, includin' a unicorn with defensive spells. Two snipers in the nests. Rest are inside." He frowned, "Ah spotted lots o' mutilated carcasses, but only two livin' colts in the cages. They're letting the dogs nip at 'em. Others must be inside as well."

I looked at Velvet with sudden concern as I remembered the horrors I had encountered in the Ponyville Library and Carousel Boutique. "Velvet? Are you sure you don't want to stay behind on this one? From what I've seen, these raiders take pleasure in desecrating the former homes of Fluttershy's closest friends…"

Velvet Remedy walked forward. "I'm not staying behind. Let's go."

* * *

Calamity flew me in through an open window on the second floor of Fluttershy's cottage. As soon as I had my footing, I levitated Velvet Remedy in after us, covering my muzzle, my eyes watering from the stench. The inside of the cottage was beyond foul.

The bedroom had been willfully destroyed. The bed, still displaying a bit of its butterfly motif in the carving, had been set on fire with a broken lantern and the burnt remains used as a toilet. Repeatedly. Pictures were knocked from shelves and smashed. Books were defiled. A fireplace was filled with a pile of skulls, some with rotting meat still on the bones. The rotting carcasses of small animals hung from the rafters. Some sort of wicked, bluish ivy had crawled up one wall and entwined with the rafters before dying. I suspected the raiders had poisoned the ground, killing all plant life as well as any animals unfortunate enough to try to find food or water here.

Velvet Remedy rushed to the window and threw up. I felt disgusted, not only at what I was seeing and smelling, but because I wasn't at the window doing the same.

Velvet Remedy moved back from the window as we heard the voices from downstairs.

"You want a knife? Little Bucky didn't need a knife," a cruel mare's voice laughed.

"Oh give the kid a knife," a buck growled. "Makes it more interesting." I slowly crept towards the stairwell, Calamity in front of me.

"Now remember, kids…" a third voice chuckled as I reached the railing and looked down.

The room below was filled with old, rusty cages. Most were empty, but there were nearly half a dozen foals locked up inside some of them. They were all staring down at the center of the room, eyes wide with terror. Several were crying.

The center of the floor had been torn up. Two fillies and a colt were in the hole, a tangled mesh of rusty barbed wire ringing it. One of the fillies was crumpled in the dirt, bleeding from multiple wounds, the flesh torn from her scalp. The colt looked battered and was breathing heavily, keeping weight off of one foreleg. Both he and the standing filly were shaking, tears running down their young faces.

The raiders were gathered around their crude, home-made version of The Pit – smoking, drinking and lounging on furniture that integrated the bones of ponies.

"…the one that survives gets the bodies of their parents back."

BLAM!!

"How dare you!" Velvet Remedy screamed, swiveling her combat shotgun towards the second raider as the first fell. **"The wasteland isn't hard enough? Sick enough? Without you monsters making it worse?"**

BLAM!! The second shot tore the left hindleg and flank off the second raider. He collapsed screaming in a pool of blood.

"And in *Fluttershy's house?!"* Velvet Remedy tossed her shield up over the children as she marched down the stairs, her expression full of unbridled fury. I watched, frozen.

"I'll have your head on a fuckin' plate!" the raider mare screamed as she dove for a riot shotgun.

BLAM!! Our shotgun surgeon splattered open the chest of the wounded raider. **"How dare you be this foul!?"**

Outside we could hear explosions interspersed with the irregular gunshot. SteelHooves was engaging the enemy.

The raider mare swung around, the riot shotgun in her muzzle, and found herself facing down Velvet Remedy's barrel. The raider seemed to freeze, staring at the black hole of her death.

Our unicorn was trembling with rage. **"I've never killed a pony before,"** she said, her voice soft but still amplified by her spell.

This is Velvet's Arbu, I thought suddenly. At least she had the benefit that nopony anywhere would question the vileness of the ponies she was eradicating. At least she was saving children, not scarring them.

BLAM!!

Velvet lowered the shotgun, turning away from the third raider's raggedly decapitated body. **"Far as I'm concerned, I still haven't."**

* * *

"I didn't want to!" the little colt, Bucky, was bawling. "I-I didn't mean it. They m-made me do it! I-I didn't want t-t-to hurt h-her!"

The little filly with the head injury was dead. She had expired before we could get to her. Velvet Remedy hugged the colt, soothing him as best she could despite looking shell-shocked herself.

We had saved nine foals in all. There had been three outside, one with a black coat who had curled up so far inside his cage that even Calamity hadn't spotted him. To our surprise, he was a pegasus, great-grandson of a Dashite named Radar. Calamity had heard of the rogue pegasus. "Last one t' give the Enclave the kiss-off," he told me. "B'fore my time."

I was putting the burden of getting the foals to safety on the three young heroes. The yard of the cottage had a wagon filled with cages – undoubtedly how the raiders had brought the foals here. It would serve as lightly armored transportation. I had seen that the wounded buck now had the riot shotgun. Once Calamity had worked his repair wizardry on it, the riot shotgun had become a truly respectable weapon. Even better than Velvet's own. They should be able to make it to New Appleloosa as long as they went straight there.

New Appleloosa wasn't my favorite place to send refugees. But it was the only place close. Junction R-7 was too far, and the only place closer had apparently been The Republic. They couldn't go back there.

"I wish we could come with you," I told the amber mare, realizing I had never gotten her name. "But we really have to be going."

She nodded. "Thank you. The Wasteland Heroine would be proud of you!"

I looked obliquely, reddening. "I… um… yeah. I hope so." I kicked my hoof in the dirt.

"Heh. Anypony ever tell you you're cute like that?" she asked, then gave me a little kiss on the cheek before scampering off to her friends. They were trying to coax the little colts and fillies onto the wagon. I blinked, my thoughts blown apart.

Within half an hour, the wagon was pulling away, hauled by the two unwounded young heroes. SteelHooves had ensured the raiders outside never got to harm them, and they were headed to New Appleloosa with a story of the "heroism and awesome might" of the Applejack's Rangers.

I could almost feel a warmth radiating off of SteelHooves. He had done Applejack proud, and he knew it. I hoped he was finally beginning to really heal.

I turned and looked at Velvet. She had managed to hold it together until the wagon was moving. But as I watched, she began to tremble, then collapsed in sobs. Calamity was there to catch her.

"Why does it all have to be so horrible?" Velvet sobbed. "How can these… horrible creatures be ponies?" I stared at the ground, having wondered the same thing. "We fight and hurt and bleed to try to make Equestria better," Velvet said, burying her face into Calamity's neck. "But you can't stop something until you take away its reason for being that way…" I thought of the Pink Cloud. "…and… but… there's no reason for the raiders! No reason for them to be s-so vile! N-n-no r-reason at all."

* * *

The sun was setting as Calamity landed the *Sky Bandit* at the edge of Splendid Valley. All about us were dead ponies and the strewn wreckage of a military camp. One of Red Eye's banners, slightly scorched, flapped in the wind.

"Well, we're fucked," Calamity stated as he detached himself from the *Sky Bandit's* harness. (After the other morning, he had jury-rigged a quick-release mechanism.) He had spent the last few hours skirting the boundary of the valley, looking for this camp. This was one of those parts of the plan I had told him before extracting my memories.

The notes I had left myself on my PipBuck were very vague, clearly written to be reassuring but not informative, but they did include a mention that we were supposed to stop here just before flying into the valley itself. I wasn't sure exactly why, but I suspected it had to do with whatever I had gone into Red Eye's encampment around Tenpony Tower for. Something important enough that I took another Party-Time Mint-al, so I was really hoping it was damn vital… or maybe not, seeing as whomever we were supposed to meet here had been dead for days.

Large black birds were picking at the carcasses. I felt queasy as one of them pulled the eyeball from the armored corpse of a brown earth stallion.

"These wounds are from alicorn spells," SteelHooves noted, moving amongst the bodies. "The Goddess' children did this."

A total massacre. And not a single alicorn dead. Damn.

"Ah'm guessin' this means the Goddess and Red Eye ain't even pretendin' t' be on the same side anymore."

"Not necessarily," SteelHooves offered. "This could be a pre-emptive strike. Or maybe she just didn't like part of his army sitting this close." The more I saw, the more this struck me as part of the forces that withdrew from Tenpony Tower. "Either way, I doubt Red Eye has the benefit of instant communication. There's a good chance he doesn't know this happened. And when he finds out, the Goddess could pass this off as an unfortunate attack by something out of Everfree."

"Is that it, then?" Calamity asked me. "Plan over?"

I shook my head. "I… I don't know." I was the wrong person to ask. I looked around for Xenith. She had disappeared again.

Velvet was curled up in the *Sky Bandit.* Pyrelight was stroking her with a wing.

"Look, if we're still a go," Calamity told me, "I want to leave Velvet back here with

SteelHooves. She's not in any shape to be doing anything else right now." I agreed. Assuming, of course, that the plan allowed them to remain behind. Dammit, where had the zebra vanished off to this time?

I rotated and jumped back as I found myself muzzle-to-muzzle with the striped face of our zebra.

"What we need is still here," she said cryptically, her exotic voice low and urgent. "We best move swiftly. I have seen the Goddess' children just beyond the ridge. They are engaged with a hydra, but the battle will not last long." A hydra?! I suddenly guessed what had stomped its way past the slaver encampment in Fluttershy's cottage. "Do what you must do, Littlepip."

I nodded, both relieved that things were still on track and stunned by the thought of the hydra. Part of me really wanted to see that battle. But I knew I wouldn't. I checked the notes on my PipBuck just to make sure, but I was right.

Now it was time for me to put on the blindfold.

* * *

I peeked.

I couldn't help myself. As Calamity soared across Splendid Valley, hauling the *Sky Bandit* behind him, I heard the roars of the hydra and I just had to look. One peek couldn't hurt, right?

The first thing I saw was that I was alone in the *Sky Bandit*. That shocked me. I felt certain that at least Xenith would be with me as well.

I scrambled to the window, looking out. But there was nothing to see. Splendid Valley stretched on for miles. I could see Maripony on the horizon, and the crater filled with hundreds of hellhound holes. Thunder cracked and the hydra roared again, telling me that I was looking out the wrong side of the passenger wagon.

"Whatcha movin' 'round so much fer?" Calamity asked as I shifted to the opposite window. I felt a pang of guilt, but it was swiftly washed away by the spectacle of the battle.

One alicorn lay crushed and bloody on the ground. A second was in the mouth of the hydra's head farthest to its left. The monster was absolutely huge, and the head was almost able to swallow the alicorn whole. Only her wings protruded from its closed maw, fluttering limply as it chewed the life out of her. Three more alicorns swooped around the hydra, dodging the remaining heads as they snapped at their prey. One of the hydra heads sucked in a deep breath and blasted out some sort of gas, enveloping one of the Goddess' magically shielded children. The purple alicorn's shield seemed to protect her. She tilted up a wing, spinning in place as a second head's maw opened wide, and folded in her wings.

There was a flash of light where the alicorn used to be. The head of the gaping hydra exploded with a wet sound, the crumpled, and blood-soaked form of the purple alicorn falling to the ground.

I gaped. The alicorn had sacrificed itself and teleported inside the monster's skull! Quickly, I blindfolded myself again, thankful that my head was too small for such a grotesque tactic.

{{WELCOME BACK, MY GUESTS!}} the chorus of voices drowned out my thoughts. *{{MY CHILDREN WILL GUIDE YOU, THAT YOU MAY BASK IN THE PRESENCE OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL GODDESS!}}*

My head began to throb.

I felt the *Sky Bandit* touch down. I waited. According to my notes, Calamity would tell me when I could take the blindfold off. I heard him releasing himself from the harness. I listened as his hoofsteps drew near. He stopped just outside the door. And we waited.

{{WHY DO YOU LOITER?}}

Don't you know? I thought at her.

"Okay, Li'lpip." Calamity said. I lifted the blindfold. There were two dark-green alicorns standing on the path ahead, and I could see dozens gathered around the Maripony ruins. Just standing there. Staring at us. Mindlessly.

No, one-mindedly. I shuddered.

"Ah'm not gonna be here when y'all are finished," Calamity told me, his extreme dislike of this plan clear with every word. My eyes opened wide. I knew I was going in alone, but I hadn't realized my ride was leaving without me. What the hell? How was I supposed to…

My pegasus friend pointed towards a section of the rubble. "There's yer ride out." I followed his hoof and spotted a bit of pink hidden in the wreckage. The *Griffinchaser II.* I had wondered what had become of that after we left Old Olneigh.

{{THE GODDESS GROWS IMPATIENT!}}

Yeah, yeah. I'm on my way, I thought. *I've got what you've asked for. Just hold your alicorns.*

There was only one set of instructions left in my notes:

Keep your Eyes-Forward Sparkle up, stall and wait for the signal.

* * *

This time, the Goddess' alicorns had not led me to the observation room, but right into the heart of the Goddess herself. I levitated myself above the dusty lake of I.M.P. and stared up between the vats at the floating face of the Goddess.

Lights on my E.F.S. compass indicated the two green alicorns flanking me, and then a vague, untargetable haze that seemed to fill the rest of the room. The haze was brightest when I swiveled my head towards the vat that Trixie had fallen into so many decades ago.

I found myself dreading this. Even as I spoke with her, telling the Goddess what I had found, I knew that I was just delaying the inevitable. The Black Book was in my saddle bags, cold against my flank. And I had brought it here. On purpose. I was about to let it fall into the hooves of the absolute worst "pony" who could ever gain it. On purpose.

There was no amount of heroic acts or lives saved that would make up for this evil.

{{WEATHER CONTROL? THAT IS ALL? THE GODDESS EXPECTED… MORE FROM RED EYE. WHAT MANNER OF THREAT IS THAT?}}

"You're the one that assumed what he was after in the Ministry of Awesome was a threat to you," I reminded the Trixie-thing, speaking aloud because just thinking at the floating lightshow pony head was just a little too creepy.

{{THEN CLEARLY THIS SINGLE PONY PROJECT IS A THREAT! AND JUST A VERY CLEVER ONE THAT WILL TAKE THE GODDESS A MOMENT TO COMPREHEND. BUTJUST A MOMENT! AH YES… }}

I stared, trying not to let my disbelief project too strongly.

{{OR MAYBE IT WAS NOT THIS SINGLE PEGASUS PROJECT THAT HE WAS AFTER! TELL ME EVERYTHING YOU SAW IN THE MINISTRY OF AWESOME!}}

Well, stalling wasn't going to be hard.

{{STALL? WHY DO YOU STALL? FOALISH LITTLE PONY! THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO THAT IS OF CONCERN OR CONSEQUENCE TO THE MIGHTY GODDESS!}}

Standing there, staring at the amorphous nothing before me, I began to suspect she was right. How the hell was I supposed to stop the Goddess. Shoot her? A lot? Unless I picked up bullets of Goddess-killing, that just wasn't going to do a damn thing. And she had every spell of the alicorns. Probably every spell of Trixie, Twilight Sparkle, Mosaic and Gestalt… if not every unicorn she had consumed. She could think me dead.

This was hopeless.

{{YES! YOUR SILLY LITTLE PLAN AGAINST THE GODDESS IS HOPELESS! THE GODDESS IS NOT IMPRESSED! YOU… wait, who?}}

What?

{{WHO?}}

What, are you an owl now? I suddenly thought of Wordsworth.

{{YOU THOUGHT OF NAMES. THINK THE NAMES AGAIN!}}

Oh. Oops? There was no way I could have foreseen the Star Orb when making this plan. Did I just trip up on something?

Stall. *Well, here goes nothing…*

I thought of the orbs, remembering them as best I could. Every detail. Focusing most heavily on the Star Orb.

* * *

I spent what felt like hours replaying Canterlot in my head. Even when I sensed the approach of others, more alicorns I assumed, I did not stop. I went over each memory orb multiple times, but kept coming back to the Star Orb. Whenever I did, the Goddess grew quiet in my mind. I think the memory stunned her.

Finally, she demanded I stop.

{{Enough of that memory! It… it is not important!}}

I suspected deeply that it was the most important memory ever.

But I didn't have time to investigate my suspicions. The location identifier started flashing on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. But it wasn't telling me where I was. How could it? I'd been in the same place for hours. In fact, it wasn't telling me anything. Just flashing, getting my attention.

This must be the signal. But… what do I do now?

Then it told me.

RUN!

XENITH HAS PLANTED THE BALEFIRE BOMB BENEATH MARIPONY.

YOUR FRIENDS ARE SAFELY AWAY.

YOU HAVE THIRTY-EIGHT MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

RUN!

What, what, what, WHAT!??

The balefire bomb is here!? How did it get here? How did Xenith get past all the hellhounds? I knew she was sneaky, but that was beyond the pale! How could I have asked her to take that risk? And I was supposed to get out of range on the damn pedal-machine? That's insane! What was I doing standing here? Why the hell would I have gone into this place? Why would I have…

Even as I panicked, the pieces of my plan fell into place.

Of course I had needed to be unnaturally persuasive. What could have been more difficult, more worthy of resorting to Party-Time Mint-als, than talking Red Eye into giving me the bomb? No wonder he started pulling out after that. He was taking the bomb to the camp. Tenpony Tower hadn't been under a megaspell threat in over a week! I'd made Homage safe before I'd even left.

What we need is still here, Xenith had said. I remembered how small the Balefire Bomb looked in Pinkie Bell's barn. Small enough a little filly could move it around, if with difficulty.

I remembered going to speak with Gawd, but I'd cut out the memory of what had happened in Shattered Hoof.

Blackwing! I remembered saying, *I was hoping to see you. I have something I need to ask you for, and I hoped we could come to an arrangement.*

I remembered all the times I had lost track of Xenith in battle. How she'd managed to follow me without the Twilight Society catching her.

Xenith had Blackwing's zebra stealth cloak! And zebra stealth cloaks even mute scent.

YOU HAVE THIRTY-SEVEN MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

But why would I have…

Don't watch any of these until after you/I get the Black Book and take it to Maripony. I'd written that to myself. Then told Calamity to allow me to view those two orbs we had picked up from the merchant just before we went to Shattered Hoof.

The argument between Applejack and Rarity flashed through my head:

Ya said ya were gonna get rid o' that cursed thing!

I said I would burn It. And I tried. But as you can see, It doesn't burn. I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.

Well… ya still shoulda gotten rid o' it!

How? I doubt anything short of a megaspell could destroy It. And I certainly don't want to dispose of The Book where It could find Its way into the wrong hooves.

I didn't bring the Black Book here to give it to the Goddess. I brought it here to destroy it once and for all! Crush two eggs under one hoof.

The little pony in my mind was prancing nervously, trying to shout down my thoughts with the scream of "Bomb! BOMB! Get AWAY from the BOMB!"

{{THE ZEBRA!}}

Crap!

I floated the Black Book out of my saddlebags and tossed it into the taint. It splashed, then bobbed, the twisted and profane black leather floating with the debris.

No! Think of all the great things you could do!

I backpedaled, my brain finally working. I needed to get out of here now!

You could save Twilight Sparkle!

My eyes were still locked on the Book. But the little pony in my head was screaming. There was no time for that anymore!

Thump. I backed into somepony. My panic skyrocketed, my heart skipping a beat, and my levitation magic imploded, dropping me into the mucky lake of taint.

I spun around to see who was blocking my exit.

Three ponies in Enclave Armor stood blocking the doorway. In front of them, a stately dusk-colored pegasus flew forward, dressed in sophisticated grey barding with a sleek military elegance.

"Greetings, Goddess," the pegasus called out, staring up at Trixie's light show, seeming unfazed. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Harbinger, and I am here on behalf of the Enclave."

It's an Enclave experiment all right, Calamity had said about the science project we had found in Old Olneigh. *Under orders of Harbinger, one of the Enclave High Council.*

The Goddess had more important things on her mind…

{{CHILDREN! FLEE!!!}}

…as did I. I desperately searched for a way around them. I could try floating them, but they had wings. I wouldn't be able to hold them in place just by lifting their hooves off the ground. I could try to fight my way through, but these were Enclave. It could be like fighting three or four Calamitys, and I would so thoroughly lose. Even if I won, my injuries would assure I didn't get out in time.

YOU HAVE THIRTY-SIX MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

"There is no need to flee," Harbinger assured the Goddess calmly. "We mean you no harm. In fact, I have come to offer you an alliance between the Enclave and the Goddess."

I froze, my jaw dropping. "Wait… *what?!"* For the briefest moment, I forgot about the bomb, turning to stare at the pegasus.

The Goddess was ultimately genocidal. Her plans for Equestria meant the end of all ponies. And worse, the end of all individuality. She was a horror. And the Enclave wanted to *ally* with her?

{{FLY, MY CHILDREN!! SAVE YOURSELVES!!}}

Okay, and part of me was a little bit impressed with the Goddess. Trixie knew she was about to die, and her final act was to save the alicorns. Damn.

"We have recently become aware of what the pony named Red Eye is doing," Harbinger stated. "We know he opposes you and has plans to overthrow you. His intentions with the towers pose a clear and imminent danger to the Enclave and its citizens. His intentions are nothing short of an act of war."

Oh this was not happening! I pranced anxiously in the taint, looking around for an alternate escape route. Oh Goddesses, even if I found one, there wouldn't be enough time for me to get away!

"But the Enclave military is…" Harbinger permitted himself a chuckle, "… let us just say 'formidable'. Should we combine our efforts, I have no doubt that we can deal with Red Eye and eliminate the threat he poses in its entirety. Swiftly."

YOU HAVE THIRTY-FIVE MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

Oh no! NonononononononoNO! This is bad! Need to find a way out *NOW!*

"And with the threat of Red Eye and his plots wiped away," Harbinger concluded, smiling the earnest grin of a politician, "You can rule all of Equestria below unchallenged. We will remain above, unthreatened. And we will all know peace in our time."

The observation room! It was designed to protect against a megaspell detonation. It had saved Twilight Sparkle before!

Of course, it had also trapped her inside. But I'd worry about that later.

Breaking into full gallop, I telekinetically launched myself to one of the remaining catwalks and ran for the observation room.

"What's she doing?" Harbinger asked. "Ambrosia, after her!" One of the black-carapaced pegasi took to the air, giving chase.

My heart was pounding in my chest. An odd itch was creeping through the insides of my legs, spreading out.

YOU HAVE THIRTY-FOUR MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

I dashed into the observation room, looking around frantically. Last time, this place sealed up in reaction to the balefire bomb's explosion. But this time, it would go off right under Maripony. In the time it took the shutters to close, I'd be dead from heat alone!

But I knew Twilight Sparkle wouldn't create a safe room with such as fatal flaw. There had to be some way of manually telling the safe room to seal.

YOU HAVE THIRTY-THREE MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

"Hold!" Ambrosia ordered as she landed outside, folding her wings and trotting through the door. I paid her no attention, searching with mounting panic.

"I said hold!" the armored Enclave mare demanded. "As in freeze right where you're fucking standing or I'll turn you into a glowing pile of soup!"

"Bomb!" I shouted at her in frustration, scanning all the controls and monitors for anything that might trigger the room's lockdown.

"What bomb?" she barked. "What are you talking about? And I said freeze!" I heard the magical energy weapons built into her armor begin to power up.

Relief washed over me as I spotted the removable panel. I froze, looking towards Ambrosia, smiling as my horn glowed. Behind me, the screws on each corner of the panel rotated and fell out. The panel dropped to the floor with a clunk.

The sound caught the Enclave soldier's attention. When she looked towards the panel so did I.

There was a nice, big, red button marked PUSH TO INITIATE SAFE ROOM PROTOCOL. I gave it a hard buck.

"What did you do?" Ambrosia cried out as the door closed and the armored plate came down. She spun, watching massive, armored shutters lower over the windows. "What did you just do?"

YOU HAVE THIRTY-TWO MINUTES TO GET CLEAR.

"Good morning, children! This is DJ Pon3, coming at ya over the airwaves. And

guess what's riding hot on my tail? That's right: the news!

"That bright light and roll of thunder that a lot of you reported from the vicinity of Splendid Valley just over forty hours ago? The one a lot of you said was like a megaspell going off? Turns out it was a megaspell going off. Right in the heart of Splendid Valley.

"Now I don't have a lot of details. But I can confirm that a whole mess of alicorns fled the valley less than half an hour before the detonation. And I can now confirm reports that our Wasteland Heroine was on the Ponyville side of Splendid Valley earlier that day. Now I don't know yet if there's any connection, but if I was a betting pony, I'd say our Bringer of Light had her hoof in what happened out there.

"Not really the light I was talkin' about, Stable Dweller. Our prayers go out to you. I hope you're okay. If you… or anypony has any further information… please let me know. Right away.

"As for reports of odd behavior from the alicorns in the wake of this occurrence, or claims of seeing odd black ponies flying through the sky, I can only…"

BZZZzzzzzzzzzzckht!

"Greetings, citizens of the Equestrian Wasteland.

"This is the Grand Pegasus Enclave. We have commandeered this broadcast to deliver an important message to all ponies:

"Do not be afraid. We are here to save you!"

Footnote: Maximum Level

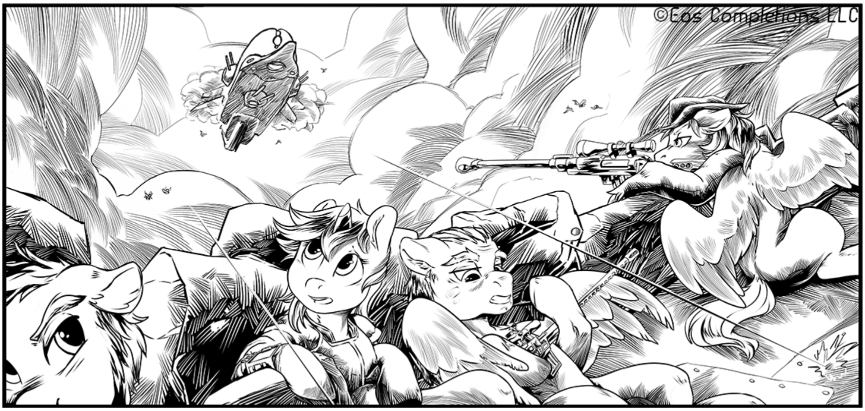
Quest Perk added: Touched by Taint (2) – Exposure to Taint has altered your physiology. You do not take immediate damage from radiation. In fact, you gain extra healing while being exposed to it. However, radiation continues to build up in your system as normal.

Volume Five

The Virtue of Littlepip

Chapter Thirty-Nine

This Coming Storm



"We all gotta go sometime. I was just hoping for something more… heroic."

Souls.

Souls are the spirit and essence of a pony, the fundamental core of their nature and the kernel of life that exists beyond the biology of flesh and blood and mental synapses.

I had seen empirical evidence of the reality of souls. Beyond that, my beliefs in an afterlife where the souls of dead ponies continued on in eternal peace and in the transcendent souls of Celestia and Luna as Goddesses who watched over us with love and pity and hope – these surpassed the foundations of knowledge and were the architecture of faith.

But the two things I did know: souls had a living power, and a soul was a hard thing to kill.

There was no way I could know for sure if the Black Book had been destroyed. But if it was not, then it was either buried under rubble or fused into a crater of glass.

The Black Book hadn't needed to be the conduit of some eldritch cosmic horror, or its pages filled with blasphemous magic, to corrupt those close to it. It was enough that the Book was the host to a wicked and twisted soul – the soul of an insane, maleficent zebra.

The Black Book called out to those around it who were susceptible to its influence. Two alicorns walked into the throne room. One sensed the presence of the Black Book. The other did not. Calamity had not reacted to it when I had found it; my other friends had been near it as they traveled with me. But it had sunk barbed hooks into my mind even before I had retrieved it. We had encountered two alicorns who had been affected by the temptations of the Black Book without ever having seen it or opened its pages. Nightseer had been transformed by the Book's proximity. She had been one of those who the Goddess had sent to find the Book. Did her telepathy leave her especially defenseless? Had the Black Book filled the void in her mind left by the absence of the Goddess?

I was vulnerable to it. My weaknesses – addiction, curiosity and the shame of having only a single spell – played to its strengths.

The soul of the Black Book had been particularly ancient and powerful. I had possessed the Black Book for less than two days, and it had already begun to tempt me. Clumsily perhaps at first; the Book wasn't telepathic like the Goddess. Most of the horrors in my nightmare I had provided myself. The Book merely used the tools my fevered night terrors gave it. And still, I did not have the strength alone to withstand its first probing attacks. To be able to stand against that influence as it continuously tried to erode you away, to hold to any part of yourself after years with the book, much less to take its twisted gifts and create something noble and good from them… that would take a level of moral endurance and fortitude almost beyond comprehension.

Be unwavering!

How often had those six ponies from the past, through the radiance of their souls, given me insights I couldn't have had myself, or allowed me to tap reserves of strength and will that I shouldn't have been able to muster? They had saved me and guided me since finding Applejack in Old Appleloosa, their influence growing with each statuette I found. But it was only after I had brought them all together that they had been able to intervene on my behalf more directly.

I believe it was no coincidence that Rarity was the first to appear. My mind and soul had ever-so-briefly become the battleground for two warring influences. One powerful soul of evil and madness against six shards that shone with the virtue and hope of Rarity and her five closest friends. The shards of the statuettes were not truly those of the Ministry Mares – I suppose they were more like Rarity's soul wearing perfect disguises – but they shone with the true nature of those other ponies. They burned with the love and compassion and virtue and nobility of each of the Ministry Mares in turn. They were eternal, metaphysical images of the deepest, truest nature of those ponies, lit up like beacons, fueled by a shining piece of Rarity herself.

Rarity, whose magical talent had always been in the shadow of Twilight Sparkle, must have seemed like easy prey to the zebra soul within the Black Book. It had been wrong. She was one of the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony for a reason. And when the soul images of the Ministry Mares were brought together, they brought the inner fire that fuels the Elements of Harmony with them. They had proven more powerful, even as mere shards, than the whole soul residing in the Book. Or, at least, powerful enough to give me the strength I needed to fend it off.

If the Black Book could not stand against the gestalt of the Ministry Mares souls when they were only shards, how could it have stood against the whole soul of Twilight Sparkle combined in Unity with three of the most magically powerful mares of her time? The Black Book was not telepathic, but it could sense souls around it, knowing instinctively whom it could manipulate… and whom it could not. That last temptation of the Book had an air of desperation to it. The zebra soul had no way of knowing I was about to destroy its soul jar. It had been reaction to something else.

The Black Book had sensed the Goddess. And it had been *afraid.*

What happens to a soul when it no longer has a body to hold it? Does it truly transcend? Does it spread out, no longer contained – like the hydrogen in a balloon that has been popped – until it is no longer truly a soul, indistinguishable from the environment?

What of the souls trapped together in the horror that was the Goddess?

My goal had been to destroy the physical reality of the Goddess, and free the souls trapped inside. To allow Twilight Sparkle, Trixie and the others the rest they deserved and had been denied. I had not expected the Goddess to try to save her children, but I had not expected the impact of the six memory orbs either. By showing those memories to the Goddess, I had awoken something in Trixie. The Goddess had become lost, and I believe part of her was able to find herself in those memories. The Star Orb had been created for comparison; by showing that memory to the Goddess, I had acted like Rarity's mirror had for Pinkie Pie. Just like I had hoped the memories of the Balloon Orb might stir whatever still remained of Twilight Sparkle.

And what about my own soul?

If I died here, would Celestia and Luna welcome me, or turn me away in horror and disgust?

I knew what I had done. And my soul was blackened from it. I had finally taken that step off the cliff; I had sacrificed my own morality and goodness to save the Equestrian Wasteland. I was Red Eye now, through and through. And there would be a price for that.

Thirty-eight minutes would have been plenty of time, but that time was never meant for me. It was time enough for Xenith and Calamity to escape. I had been willing to forfeit my own life.

Thirty-eight minutes would have been enough for the alicorns of the Goddess to have scoured Maripony, found the bomb and disarmed whatever timer Red Eye had constructed for it. But the balefire bomb had never been *in* Maripony.

Thirty-eight minutes was *not* long enough for the alicorns to have fought their way through the maze of Hellhound warrens and found the bomb hidden dozens of yards beneath Maripony's foundations. The balefire bomb had gone off in a subterranean detonation directly beneath us.

* * *

I awoke in pitch darkness.

I felt sick, even worse than in the days past. My body was hot. My mouth was dry. My stomach was twisted painfully but there was nothing in it to heave. My body was covered in sweat. There was a crushing weight on my lower body that brought back memories of a nightmare: being trapped under a wall, crying out while I watched Calamity and Velvet Remedy walk away.

There was a hiss from the darkness below. The floor beneath me slanted away. I would have slid down into the hissing blackness, but I was pinned.

My PipBuck was clicking slowly.

For a few terrifying minutes, I had no idea where I was. Then I remembered the bomb. Remembered running for the safe room. Bucking the emergency button.

I didn't recall a whole lot after that. My memories were a jumble. But I did remember feeling the almighty ***FWOMP!!!*** from somewhere underneath us. The feeling of the whole room being thrust upwards as the bomb annihilated everything above it. A brief moment of weightlessness and the rush of falling.

Click. …Click.

I turned on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, wondering when I had turned it off. A dozen warnings flashed across it. The safe room had survived two megaspells, one almost point blank. But there was a micro-fracture somewhere in its protective walls and radiation was leaking in. Considering how hot it must be outside, the fact that I was still alive and the room wasn't an unbearable oven, spoke amazing praise of Twilight and her Ministry. But I was swiftly reaching fatal levels of exposure.

I floated a RadAway from my saddlebags, bracing against the horrid taste. According to my inventory sorter, the other medical supplies I had packed – several healing potions and a vial of Xenith's bleeding-stopper goop – were all gone. I had been conscious before, but I had no recollection of it.

The magic of the safe room must have prevented me from being turned to paste by the concussive force of the blast alone. Even still, with the fall I must have taken, I was lucky I didn't break my neck. Or anything else. According to my E.F.S., I was remarkably unbattered… for a mare who was dying.

Wait… hadn't there been somepony else in here with me?

Peering into the darkness, I tried to remember. My E.F.S. compass was telling me I was alone. I lifted my PipLeg and turned on the light.

Oh merciful Goddesses!

My PipBuck light shone down a room, tilted at an insane angle. The terminal bank had torn from the wall. The concrete of the ceiling had collapsed in, revealing the shiny purple-tinted metal above it. A large slab of the concrete lay across me, pinning me in place.

Below, the lower third of the room was filled with discolored water, rubble and the mangled filing cabinet. A small spray was coming from a section in the wall which had torn open. Something floated in the dark pool beneath me.

It was a more spacious coffin than the healing booth. But I had been foolish to think this room would save me. I was trapped, locked inside. And even if I could escape, outside was instant death.

I'm out of food, and the safe room's water talisman seems to have been corrupted. Twilight had said. *At least, I'm fairly confident that pure water isn't supposed to be that color.*

The water talisman was tainted.

The body of what had once been Ambrosia was beneath that water… mostly. Her body had bulged and metastasized under the taint, straining against the armor. A blob of malformed flesh had pushed out through the open visor like a tongue.

A fleshy, grotesquely-misshaped worm floated on the surface of the water. I screamed as I realized it was one of my own hindlegs.

After several long minutes of terror, I realized I could feel both of my hindlegs. Barely able to breathe, I shifted my light, trying to look under the slab that was crushing me.

Both my hindlegs were there, intact and healthy… except one was the pink of exposed skin with only a light fuzz of a coat.

I had lost my leg in the fall… and I had regrown it!

I didn't think it was possible to feel even sicker, but I did. A deep, soul-aching horror filled me as I realized that I wasn't even a pony anymore. I was something else. I wanted to cry, to scream.

Was I a ghoul, transformed by the bomb? Or was this from my exposure to the taint? How far removed was I now from being one of the Goddess' children?

At least the radiation would kill me before the room filled enough for me to drown. Unless I was enough of a pseudo-alicorn that the radiation wouldn't kill me. I prayed that it was.

Please, please… Celestia, I beg you…

Have mercy on me.

I turned off my light. It was better not seeing.

⁂

Something wrenched the safe room. The concrete slab scraped against me as it shifted, drawing blood. The wounds were already closing as I tried to brace myself, worried that the slab might slide off. Then I felt the whole room lift, soaring into the air.

The tainted water washed over me as the room righted itself. The misshaped flesh-blob that had once been my leg washed up against me. I screamed in horror at the slimy touch of my desecrated former flesh.

A violent grinding filled the air, and the metal shutters over the windows pulled away, revealing a purple-tinted sky of clouds filled with blowing ash. The armored glass shattered, the razor-sharp shards hovering and then whisking away.

My PipBuck began to click rapidly.

Somewhere above, I spotted the dark silhouette of a wagon and a glowing light of green and gold. For a moment, I thought it was Pyrelight. But then I realized the glow was coming from a pegasus. Had my friends come to rescue me? How? And at what cost?

"Oh Calamity…" I thought, weeping without tears, "What have you done?"

But something was wrong.

A purple glow enveloped me, a second floating the slab off my leg. I was levitated out through the obliterated window.

The super-alicorn, her coat a dark purple to the point of black, stared at me with glowing eyes as she casually tossed away the safe room, performing telekinesis that would have overstrained me with effortless ease.

The clouds above seemed awfully close. I glanced downward. We were very, very high. Below, the second crater of Splendid Valley glowed in the aftermath.

With a beat of her wings, she flew up level with the wagon above us, bringing me with her.

I realized at once that the wagon was not the *Sky Bandit*. And the glowing pegasus was not Calamity.

"Ditzy Doo?"

The super-irradiated ghoul grinned happily at me, a sickly golden-green light emanating from her mouth and around her teeth.

The creatures of radiation do not merely heal in its presence. If they absorb enough of it, they grow stronger. More powerful.

Ditzy Doo had come into Splendid Valley looking for me. She had saved me. She and…

The super-alicorn set me on the front bench of the *Absolutely Everything* delivery wagon right behind Ditzy Doo. Without the glow of her magic, the purple tint vanished from the sky, traded for a sickly green. My PipBuck's clicking went insane. We were high enough above the crater for the radiation levels to be merely bad, but Ditzy Doo was shedding enough radiation to make this a very short rescue.

The glowing ghoul smiled and pointed back at the wagon. I turned around, looking in through a small window.

Inside the wagon were crates of RadAway, the packets glowing an inviting orange. I quickly levitated several and began to drink, turning back to thank her.

I stopped as my eyes caught the cutie mark on the super-alicorn's flank: a large, pink star surrounded by smaller white ones.

The super-alicorn was silent, impassive. Her gaze seemed fixed on my saddle bags.

I was struck by a flash of insight. The Goddess sent her children away. But she was telepathic, maintaining contact with them. When her body was destroyed, and the souls of the countless ponies who had been consumed into her were set free, some of them, the strongest ones, found their way into the bodies of her fleeing children.

Possession.

But those bodies already had souls of their own. It was unlikely this could last. Already, the cutie mark on the super-alicorn was beginning to fade.

I scrambled. If this was Twilight Sparkle in any way, there was something she needed to hear. I turned up the volume on my earbloom and levitated it towards her as I found the file.

The voice of Pinkie Pie, tinny and distorted, crackled through the air.

"Hi Twilight. It's me…

* * *

"…I mean, I have you with me now, so you'll kinda be with me anyway. But it's not the same. I want the real Twilight Sparkle. I…

"I want my friend back.

"Please?

"I'll do anything…"

The super-alicorn had hovered, seeming transfixed by the sound, until the message ended. Then, wordlessly, she turned and began to fly away. The cutie mark on her flank was already completely gone.

"Twilight! Wait!" I cried out after the disappearing alicorn. "Star Sparkle is still alive! And Spike…"

But whatever part of Twilight Sparkle my words might once have been able to reach were gone now. Evaporated. Or, if my heart could hope, just asleep.

I wanted to cry. But my body couldn't produce tears.

I drank another of those horrid RadAways as Ditzy Doo turned and began flying us out of Splendid Valley.

* * *

Ditzy Doo brought the wagon low as we reached the edge of the valley. We began flying along the border, moving more slowly.

We were searching for something. I wanted to ask what, but Ditzy Doo couldn't speak.

What did you do? What did you just do?

The voice of Ambrosia fluttered through my mind. I fought to remember.

I'd told her about the bomb. I was sure about that. I couldn't recall exactly what I said, but an antsy mare with a magical energy battle saddle didn't exactly engender a desire to lie.

Her response had been to try to call Harbinger through the broadcaster built into her helmet.

This room is designed to stop megaspells, I recalled telling her. *Your radio isn't going to penetrate.*

She had looked at me with panic. *I have to tell Harbinger! He has to get out of here. We have to pull back.* Her words had sparked a burst of fear in my breast.

How many ponies do you have outside?

The ground passed slowly beneath us. I couldn't remember any more.

I caught them on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, friendly lights appearing on my E.F.S. compass, before I actually spotted my friends. As we approached a clearing not far from the devastated Red Eye camp, SteelHooves appeared, pulling camouflage netting off of the *Sky Bandit.* Velvet Remedy, Xenith and Calamity emerged from within.

They looked worn, weary and bedraggled. Calamity immediately took to the air while Velvet and Xenith scanned the skies.

Pyrelight was missing from the group. Where was Pyrelight?

"Didja' find anythin' this time?" my pegasus friend shouted. I tried to jump up, but my body just didn't have the energy, so instead I waved. He couldn't see me anyway. Ditzy Doo was too bright.

Ditzy Doo flew us in closer, pulling up and hovering at the edge of the clearing. I downed yet another RadAway as she waved Calamity back. I felt weak, sick, half-dead. My body was alien to me now. I wasn't me anymore. But all of that paled in comparison to the wash of joy at the impending reunion.

I needed to get to Tenpony Tower. Get cleansed of the taint I had suffered, assess what was left of me, and… if Homage would still have me… spend a forever with her and my friends.

A short forever, unfortunately. I had cleared the way for Red Eye to ascend, and he had a host of unicorns he planned to sacrifice in the process. With the threats of the Goddess and the Black Book taken care of, I now had a new quest before me: to brave the Everfree Forest and rescue those unicorns from Red Eye's Cathedral. I probably didn't have a lot of time. Now that Red Eye couldn't count on alicorns for protection anymore, he would likely act fast. But I was in no shape to fight a radroach, much less infiltrate a stronghold. My body was weeping for me to give it care and rest; I couldn't push it further until I had done so.

"Hey! It's Li'lpip!" Calamity shouted ecstatically. "Hey, everypony! Ditzy's brought back Li'lpip! She's alive!"

Velvet Remedy and Xenith began to stomp in applause. Velvet gave out a thankful shout.

SteelHooves whinnied. "Thank Applejack!" He turned to the others. "Okay, let's get out of here. I don't like being in one place too long. Especially this close to…"

The ground erupted. Fountains of dirt burst into the air as half a dozen hellhounds tore themselves out of the ground.

Ditzy Doo pulled up as one of them swung her magical energy rifle around and fired at us. Velvet Remedy let out a scream. Calamity spun in the air, kicking the lever of his battle saddle, switching ammo. One of the hellhounds closed on Xenith, taking a swipe. The zebra ducked, turning and bucking the hellhound in chest, dropping her. SteelHooves began to fire, his grenade machinegun tearing apart one of the hellhounds as she aimed a multi-gem magical shotgun towards Velvet and Xenith.

"Get to the wagon!" Calamity shouted as he took a shot, staggering a hellhound who was trying to climb onto the *Sky Bandit.*

The earth beneath SteelHooves blasted upwards as a hellhound lashed up out of the ground; the hellhound's claw slashed in a long arc, slicing through SteelHooves armor.

SteelHooves' armored body fell to the broken ground with a heavy thud. His armored head rolled a few yards away.

The world stopped.

The battle still raged, but it was someplace far away. All the color and sound seemed to mute, leaving just me, the beating of my heart, and the slow rocking of SteelHooves' head.

SteelHooves was dead.

A cold, wet chill ran down my body. There was no coming back from that. I'd seen Xenith decapitate a Canterlot zebra. But the little pony in my head was shaking in denial. No, no, she insisted. There will be an ugly warping sound and he'll be right back with us, just like always.

SteelHooves was dead.

I couldn't move. Couldn't feel. Couldn't breathe. My mind was locked up, the gears jammed.

The hellhounds weren't going to give me a moment to process, much less to grieve. The hellhound who killed SteelHooves stepped forward, skewered his claws through SteelHooves' helmet, then spun and hurled the armored head of my companion, trying to knock us out of the sky. Ditzy Doo dodged and SteelHooves' head slammed against her wagon next to me, splintering wood. The impact cracked his helmet's headlamp.

Something snapped inside me.

My horn burst with light, layer upon layer of overglow, brighter than even Ditzy Doo. The hellhounds were surrounded with light as they shot upwards into the sky, all of them, higher and higher until they were nothing but dark specks. Then they weren't visible at all.

"SteelHooves!" Velvet screamed, dashing to the fallen, headless body and wrapping it in her forelegs. All the others turned, eyes wide as they realized we had lost one of our own.

THUD!!

The ground shook as the first hellhound fell out of the sky. The mangled, broken body oozed.

THUD!! THUD!! THUD!!
THUD!! THUD!! THUD!!

* * *

Do you even know what balefire is?

Another flash of memory tugged at me as we approached New Appleloosa. We were flying low, moving quickly. Xenith stood on the *Sky Bandit,* watching the clouds. I got the impression we should be walking, but my condition was too severe for me to even try the journey.

"Ain't safe t' fly no more," Calamity called out to me, flying as close as he could to the *Absolutely Everything* wagon without suffering Ditzy-exposure. "Damn Enclave have patrols everywhere, an' anythin' airborne tends t' catch their attention. Not that the *Sky Bandit* exactly has a low profile, considerin' our cloud breach last month."

We just couldn't catch a break.

"Ya sure it was Harbinger tha' ya saw in Maripony?" Calamity asked as we began to slow.

"That's who he said he was," I called back, hating how much effort it took to shout.

"Damn. Ah figured this had t' be big when a whole regiment o' the Enclave descended on Maripony. Xenith an' I barely made it outta there. But we blew up a member o' the Enclave High Council? Ah could use one o' yer creative swears 'bout now, Li'lpip." Calamity frowned. "Congratulations. We jus' declared war on the Enclave!"

Ouch. But even as I grimaced, I realized that the Enclave had shown up knowing that Red Eye was plotting against the Goddess. If anything, they would suspect he had been behind the bomb, and I had been his agent. Which, on a very real level, was absolutely accurate.

From the Enclave's perspective, Red Eye had just declared war.

I could see Pyrelight circling above the city, a single bird of prey. She let out a hoot as the two wagons landed, Ditzy Doo setting down a little distance from the *Sky Wagon.* Pyrelight dove out of the air, disappearing into the town.

"Maybe he got out?" I offered weakly.

"Not much chance o' that," Calamity called back. "Moment the alicorns were clear, a huge alicorn shield wrapped 'round alla Maripony. I reckoned she was tryin' t' trap ya inside with her. Nopony got out."

Or she was trying to contain the blast. Protect her fleeing children.

With a shield that powerful, generated by the Goddess herself, the only thing that would get out through it was her telepathy… until the second that the bomb killed her. That was, assuming she didn't realize that the bomb wasn't within her shield. In truth, the balefire bomb was planted far enough beneath the facility that it very well could have been *outside* her shield. And if she suspected that, maybe she was trying to save herself.

Either way, it didn't matter. The megaspell-augmented balefire had proven greater than the Goddess' power.

It's magical fire, I had offered, answering Ambrosia even as I realized I really *didn't* know what balefire was, other than green and radioactive.

It's bottled, necromancy-enhanced dragon's breath, Ambrosia had told me. *The magical,* *disintegrative type of dragon's breath that can send you someplace else. In the case of balefire, probably straight to hell.*

Based on the possession of the super-alicorn (who had probably been a normal alicorn until Twilight Sparkle flew around new crater in Splendid Valley searching for survivors), Ambrosia's guess was almost certainly wrong. But the concept was still chilling.

Something Rarity had said struck me: *I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.*

I remembered thinking of Spike roasting an Enclave pony inside her armor. It was horrid and sickening to witness, but I felt a little better about it if I could imagine he was sending her soul straight to Celestia.

Which led to the hurting reality of the body being carried inside the *Sky Bandit.* Should we have SteelHooves cremated? Would Spike be willing?

"We can't stay here," Calamity said, the normal cheer gone from his voice. He looked at Ditzy Doo. "None of us."

Ditzy Doo nodded sadly. She dropped one of her chalkboards and wrote on it. "Is this permanent?"

"Nah. Ah reckon it should bleed off, jus' like when Pyrelight soaked in the Fillydelphia Crater," Calamity assured her.

"But Pyrelight took days to return to normal," Velvet Remedy reminded them. Her eyes were still wet and puffy with tears. She had been riding with SteelHooves' body and head, keeping watch over him. "And Ditzy Doo has taken far more radiation than Pyrelight did. It could be weeks."

The sweet ghoul mare looked panicked. She quickly erased her chalkboard and wrote "Silver Bell" in large letters.

Velvet Remedy nodded, smiling sadly. "I'll stay here and watch over her."

"You can't," I said, speaking up finally. "We're not allowed inside town."

Xenith looked up in surprise. "We are not?" she asked, her exotic voice betraying her own depression. "When did we offend this town?"

"B'fore yer time," Calamity said. "Back when it was jus' Li'lpip, Velvet an' me."

"Well, then I am not barred, it would seem," Xenith asserted. Turning to Ditzy Doo, she too smiled gently. "It would be a pleasure to watch Silver Bell for you while you have to be away."

Ditzy Doo forgot herself, swooping up to the zebra and giving Xenith a tight (albeit squishy) hug. Xenith stiffened but bit back any response. The ghoul pegasus swiftly backed away, writing "Sorry!" on her chalkboard.

"Hey, look, Ditzy," Calamity offered. "Ah might know where y'all could get some help. There's a mare up in Friendship City whose been researchin' radiation an' its effects on creatures. If anypony c'n help ya shed this off quicker, it would be her."

Ditzy smiled brightly, one of her eyes rolling upward as she visibly fought her urge to hug Calamity now.

"Why don'tcha travel with us fer a spell," Calamity offered. "Ain't safe t' travel alone, an we're headed that way, ain't we, Li'lpip?"

"Tenpony Tower." I nodded, realizing we couldn't cremate SteelHooves's body. He wasn't ours. "Fetlock first. We have to take SteelHooves back to Stable Twenty-Nine."

The massive gate to New Appleloosa rumbled open. The griffin bodyguard whom I had seen with Ditzy Doo before flew out, Silver Bell scampering after him. Her eyes went wide as she saw Ditzy Doo.

"Mommy, you look like Pyrelight!"

The little lavender filly began to charge across the road between us, trying to reach her. Xenith swiftly caught her, holding her back.

"Mommy!"

I heard a strangled sound. I wasn't sure if it was from Velvet or Ditzy Doo. The glowing pegasus rubbed her hoof against her chalkboard, erasing Silver Bell's name, and wrote something else before picking the chalkboard up again.

Silver Bell struggled against the restraining legs of Xenith and began to cry.

Ditzy Doo trotted halfway to where Xenith was holding Silver Bell – as close as she dared to get – and set the chalkboard down on the street.

"Stay away, love. Mommy's poison."

* * *

The clouds had begun to darken, threatening the Equestrian Wasteland with another storm.

Dark shadows moved just behind the surface of the clouds. As we watched, the shadows took the shape of great black warships descending beneath the cloud curtain. Each warship was a huge deployment hangar and platforms for massive magical energy cannons, flanked by blackest thunderclouds and moving through the air on a dozen propellers. Through my binoculars, I could barely make out the swarms of black dots that were armored pegasi flying in formations between the warships.

"Raptors," Calamity announced grimly, watching as the warships descended lower, altering course slightly. "Dragon killers."

I allowed my magic to expire, dropping my binoculars onto the ground next to me. I was at a loss for an appropriately colorful metaphor. Anything involving Luna's horn now struck me as grievously inappropriate. My gaze found Ditzy Doo, the brightest point of light. She was enwrapped in a lead-lined cloak, something she had the griffin fetch from her shop. An old mailbag hung from her side. But her hooves, face and wings still burned like an emerald furnace.

I recalled something Homage had said as DJ Pon3, claiming a "mail pony" had delivered a letter from Ditzy Doo.

Beneath the anti-radiation barding Ditzy Doo had provided me, and my own barding beneath, my own coat was growing back over my hindleg… my *new* hindleg. Just thinking about that felt deeply wrong. I'd been drinking enough RadAway to purge most of the radiation from my system, even traveling in the back of the *Absolutely Everything* delivery wagon. But I still felt weak and twisted up inside.

We were just a hill back from Trixie's cottage. In theory, we had stopped for lunch, but nopony was eating. I couldn't stomach anything, Ditzy Doo didn't have to eat, and neither Velvet nor Calamity had any appetite. They'd both just stared at their cans of beans until Ditzy Doo trotted up, dropping her chalkboard which said "Your poor beans are getting all lonely. They want to be with their stomach friends."

Calamity had chuckled and nibbled a little after that. Velvet Remedy had just given a sad smile. I drank another RadAway.

"They've been comin' down outta the sky like that the last two days," Calamity informed me. "Ponies are freakin' out. Goin' inta hidin'. Whole damn wasteland feels like it's under martial law." He looked askance at me. "They took over the broadcasts this morning. Both Red Eye an' DJ Pon3. Radio's now all Enclave, all the time."

I put in my earbloom and turned on my PipBuck's radio, trying to ignore the squirming feeling in my insides. Instead of Homage's music or DJ Pon3's voice, I caught the end of a pegasus anthem.

"Greetings, ponies of Equestria. By now, you have seen our ships in the sky overhead. Perhaps our pegasi have even landed in your streets. But there is no need for alarm. Our scouts are merely assessing the current situation before we determine how best we can help you…"

I switched it off. I'd heard better propaganda from Red Eye.

"Ah'm tryin' not t' doubt muhself here," Calamity admitted. "Ah left cuz Ah realized the Enclave never intended t' rejoin the rest o' Equestria. The Enclave wasn't interested in helpin' down here. Now Ah'm second guessin' a lot o' things."

"They tried to make a deal with the Goddess," I told him. "They aren't here to help."

"Yeah," Calamity said dourly, "Ah didn't really figure they were. This is just the backup plan."

Calamity started packing up the camouflage netting again. "Where did you get that?" I asked.

"SteelHooves," Calamity sighed. "When the Enclave first appeared, he procured this from Crossroads. Said we needed t' keep the *Sky Bandit* covered whenever we weren't movin'."

I swallowed. I started to think of all the times SteelHooves had protected us. But ended up just thinking about his voice, that deep masculine rumble – like Flutterguy's voice, Watcher had claimed – and how I'd never hear it from him again. My burning eyes wanted to cry.

"He was real good at that," Calamity said solemnly. "Thinkin' tactically."

We shared a moment of silence.

Minutes later, we were flying again. We had been trying to keep low, but the terrain was about to make that difficult. Calamity winged us upwards, gaining altitude as we passed over the ruins of Trixie's cottage.

There were several alicorns standing around it. They didn't pay us more than a fleeting glance. If anything, I would have said they looked lost.

* * *

"Tomorrow," Crossroads told us.

I blinked with surprise. We were in the security center of Stable Twenty-Nine. A somber air hung over the entire Stable. SteelHooves' body had been taken into the Crusader Maneframe room by an honor guard.

"Tomorrow?" I asked, swaying slightly. My body felt so weak; my hooves wanted a rest. My mind was fogged, but I was fairly sure that the new acting Elder's announcement was abnormal. "Isn't that… awfully fast?"

Star Paladin Crossroads neighed. "Every Steel Ranger outcast who would be able to make it is already here…"

"Applejack's Rangers," Calamity spoke up. At Crossroads' querying look, Calamity explained, "Ah know that ain't an official name, but that's how SteelHooves thought of y'all." Looking down at his hooves, he added, "Should honor it, 's'all Ah'm sayin'."

The brown mare with the cropped yellow mane nodded. "As I said, all the Applejack's Rangers who would be able to attend the Elder's funeral are already here. There is no delay. It would be unseemly to allow his body to… go unburied."

I imagined there were internal matters to address as well. SteelHooves had been the leader and symbol that all these rangers had rallied around. With him gone, Crossroads had to act quickly to keep the rangers from falling apart. Everypony seemed to expect Crossroads to step into the role of Elder, many already acted as if she was, but I sensed there was official protocol to be attended. And Crossroads was not willing to take those steps while SteelHooves remained unburied. Her love and respect for him were too much to allow that.

"Will you be able to attend?"

"Wild manticores couldn't drag us away," Calamity said. I quickly offered a prayer to Luna that Calamity's words didn't beg prophesy.

I nodded. "I couldn't travel any more tonight if I wanted to," I smiled grimly. I was having trouble standing. "We'll stay the night, so long as it is all right with you. And you have a place Ditzy Doo can stay safely."

Crossroads smiled grimly. "Your glowing friend? We can put her in one of the shielded rooms in maintenance." She explained, "I'm not going to turn away somepony just because she is a ghoul, especially not on the eve of SteelHooves' funeral; but I can't have her trotting about the Stable either. She is dangerous to those around her."

I nodded. I knew Ditzy Doo would understand.

"Where…" Nope, that was it. My legs decided that they were done with this standing thing and wanted to try something else. How about falling over? Yep, that sounded good.

Thump.

"Li'lpip!" Calamity reared, his voice full of worry.

"I… I'm fine," I told him quickly. "Floor's nice. I think I'll just stay down here for a little while."

Crossroads stepped forward. "What's wrong with her?"

"Li'lpip was in Splendid Valley when the megaspell went off," Calamity told him worriedly. "She keeps breakin' all the rules an' survivin' the impossible, an' Ah think reality is kickin' her tail fer it."

"I'll have our medics…" Crossroads was saying.

"Ah'm getting Velvet!" Calamity swore, turning and flying out of the room.

I sighed. All this fuss. I just needed to rest a bit. Just a little nap…

* * *

Dark grey clouds hung over the Equestria the next morning. A cold wind blew across the grass, bringing the scent of impending rain. Soft rumbles of thunder growled in the depths of the cloud curtain. Somewhere in the distance, the cracking booms of some sort of gunfire echoed across the landscape.

We were gathered on the greens of the rolling hills near SteelHooves' Shack. The wind rippled the dark water of the lake. Behind us, Ditzy Doo stood near a single large tree on the hilltop. She had draped a large black sheet over her lead cloak, her glowing face and hooves shining out from under it. The ghoul pegasus had somehow known to bring several such sheets.

I sat in a wheelchair just up the hill from the rows of armor-clad rangers that flanked both sides of the procession. I had been up for little over an hour. I had passed out on the floor of the security center and slept all night in the Stable Clinic. The rest had done me a world of good, but I still felt terrible, and alien in my own body. Velvet Remedy had washed me, hardly speaking a word the entire time, then insisted I attend the funeral off my hooves.

Calamity had created black dresses for both Velvet Remedy and myself out of the additional sheets provided by Ditzy Doo, again demonstrating his freaky knowledge of sewing. The cloth matched the color of my heart. I was drowning in sorrow, but I still hadn't managed to cry. I felt like I was broken.

The Rangers on each side of the aisle stomped slowly in unison, a processional beat.

Six Rangers in ceremonial barding walked slowly down the cleared aisle, their mouths holding the rods that held up the platform upon which SteelHooves' body rested. I noticed that Strawberry Lemonade was one of the pallbearers. Tears were spilling from her eyes as she kept step with the larger stallions, walking SteelHooves to the hole in the ground that would be his final resting place.

Somepony had welded SteelHooves' head back on. Somehow, that was what got to me most. My breath caught, then came out in shudders. My whole body begin to tremble, wracked with sobs.

Velvet Remedy reached up a hoof and held me gently. She had been crying softly since we left Stable Twenty-Nine, and most of the trip here yesterday. Now she comforted me while the dam inside me broke. My eyes burned fiercely. I still had no tears, but my whole body did what my eyes could not.

Star Paladin Crossroads stepped forward as the pallbearers reached the pit. She began to say the words she had written the night before, words spoken on SteelHooves' behalf.

"Applejack's Rangers," Crossroads began. "That's what Elder SteelHooves called us…"

My mind drifted as Crossroads spoke. I went back to when SteelHooves first began traveling with us.

So… why are you still with us? I had asked SteelHooves.

Maybe I have nothing better to do.

"…lived through more than any of us could imagine," Crossroads was saying. "He survived more than we could fathom. And through the centuries, his heart never strayed from his love and commitment to one single mare…"

I'd doubted him. He had kept his motivations, like his feelings, close to his chest. I remembered with pain that there was a time I considered bucking him to the curb.

I follow you because you are a better pony than I am. And you remind me of somepony else. You honestly strive to help and protect other ponies. I believe she would have approved of you.

He'd said that when I'd called him into question.

I haven't been faithful to my Oath for a long time. But at your side, I can be again.

"…nothing more appropriate than to repeat the words he spoke to us all," Crossroads reminded the Rangers gathered before her. "In the words of SteelHooves: I call on you to stop and consider your Oath. Consider where you are and what you are doing. Do your loyalties lie with Applejack, the Mare of the Ministry of Wartime Technology, the creator of the Steel Ranger armor and the mare who by Her own hooves, the sweat of Her brow and the honesty of Her heart forged the Steel Rangers?…"

Another memory galloped on the hooves of the last. SteelHooves and I staring out over the harbor, looking towards Friendship City.

I need to thank you, Littlepip.

For what? I had asked.

For failing, SteelHooves had answered, surprising me. *All this time, you have been somepony to look up to. You have made me want to be a better pony. But at the same time… you were too good. You were an impossible standard. Tonight, you have made it easier for me to live with myself.*

I curled up against Velvet Remedy, burying my face in her dress.

"…Applejack was put in charge of the Ministry of Wartime Technology because She was the Bearer of one of the Elements of Harmony, and the ruler of Equestria recognized the caliber of that. Do you think it was the Virtue in Her soul or the jewelry on Her neck that made Applejack a Bearer?" the mare who was soon to replace SteelHooves continued to speak his words with the reverence they deserved. "Today, you must choose with whom your Oath lies."

Another memory surfaced, filling me with fresh pain for my friend and for all he had lost.

It's better that my child never knew me.

SteelHooves had been a haunted pony. The shadows of his past, his sins and mistakes, pressed down on him.

I'm sorry, Littlepip. I did everything I could to make them believe taking Stable Two was a mistake. I have been for decades. But after you two showed up, and they realized there was still a functional Stable down there…

I had been so angry at him, even though he had tried his best. Part of me had wanted to kill him on the spot. He didn't resist or fight back. Instead, he had stepped up, become the better pony he had wanted to be.

Thank you, SteelHooves, Xenith had said. *For helping my daughter's village. I know it must be hard for an old soldier to help zebra kin.*

Applejack would have wanted her Rangers to protect all good people. Not just ponies.

He had struggled with his own prejudice. And was finally beginning to overcome that too. He had taken steps on a path to recovery that he would now never be able to complete.

I tried to remember the last thing I had heard him say. A warning, urging us to move. But the words themselves slipped from my memory. Instead, the actual words I clearly remembered my friend speaking were: *The rest of you can go ahead if you wish, but Applejack would not want her Rangers to ignore a cry for help.*

"…carry on in his name and in his memory," Crossroads said, concluding her eulogy.

There was a pregnant silence, broken only by the wind and the sounds of strange gunfire that continued in the distance, unabated.

“Is there anypony else who wishes to speak?” Crossroads offered, the sadness soaking her voice, “Before we lower SteelHooves into his final rest?”

I pulled myself from Velvet Remedy and focused my magic, rolling forward. She walked beside me as we made our way to the front.

I turned towards the expectant heads of the Rangers. I opened my muzzle, but my voice caught in my throat. Another sob shuddered through me.

I stared down. Again, Velvet put a steadying hoof on my shoulder. “I…” I swallowed heavily. “I only knew Applesnack for a short time. B-but I may have k-known him better than anypony. He shared th-things with me. M-m-memories…”

I stopped. I couldn’t continue. Instead, I lifted my PipBuck-infused leg. Velvet Remedy’s horn began to glow.

“I… There’s nothing I can say to do him justice. But as Applesnack is lowered, I want to play this song. It was his and Applejack’s song.”

I started the music. Velvet’s magic amplified it beautifully, allowing it to carry across the grassy hills, wafting over the pits of sand and out across the lake like a breeze.

“I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.
How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?
When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding
And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won’t survive?”

As the song played, the knights stepped forward, setting down the platform where SteelHooves’ body rested, encased still in his Steel Rangers armor adorned with red trim and Applejack’s cutie mark painted on the flank. The platform rested over the pit, the poles resting on the edges of the freshly dug earth.

“All things will end in time, this coming storm won’t linger
Why should we live as if there’s nothing more?
So hold me ’neath the thunderclouds, my heart held in your hooves,
Our love will keep the monsters from our door.”

The song was only marred by the rumble of distant thunder and the persistent sound of weapons fire. Strawberry Lemonade stepped away, her tear-reddened eyes meeting mine. Then she turned away, looking into the distance.

I heard the sharp intake of air as Strawberry Lemonade gasped. I lifted my gaze in the direction she was staring. Far, far away, I could see the mountain range that ran through Equestria, the silhouette of Canterlot jutting from the tallest cliffside, wrapped in a haze of pink that had been slowly bleeding away over the last few days. Dark forms hovered around the city, sparking flashes of colored light.

“For I know tomorrow will be a better day.
Yes, I believe tomorrow can be a better day…”

A few other Rangers were turning to look, although most kept their focus reverently on SteelHooves. Against the better judgement of my aching heart, I floated out my binoculars and turned them towards Canterlot.

Enclave Raptors, several of them, were firing on the Canterlot Ruins. No, I realized as a spike of disbelief and dread lanced through me. They were firing *under* the city!

Oh Goddesses! They *couldn’t!*

But even as I thought the words, the reinforced supports beneath the royal city gave way. The city above shifted, white towers cracking and breaking apart as the whole of

Canterlot crashed down the mountainside.

The rumble echoed over all of the Equestrian Wasteland, almost indistinguishable from the rest of the distant thunder. A black pit swallowed my heart.

We'll come back for her… I had promised. *Until then, she's safe here.*

My last promise to SteelHooves. And now I would never be able to keep it. The Enclave had destroyed the Canterlot Ruins, casually killing everypony in Stable City.

⁂

The wind cut into my mane as I stood before the gravemarker that one of the ranger ponies had already created. It was a beautiful, stately marker fashioned from a large chunk of polished rose granite that had been scavenged from the Fetlock Chamber of Commerce. Red and grey. SteelHooves' colors.

Here Rests
ELDER "STEELHOOVES" APPLESNACK
Forefather of Applejack's Rangers
Steadfast.
Enduring.
Unwavering.
…and a true friend.

Calamity stood beside me. Velvet Remedy just behind. "Xenith should be here," I noted mournfully.

"Ayep," agreed Calamity.

"She's here in spirit," Velvet Remedy reminded us.

I looked down at the base of the gravestone, and the special holder that had been fashioned there.

"She ain't the only one," Calamity said, following my gaze.

In that special niche rested the orange statuette with the blonde mane and tail which I had told Crossroads that she would find in SteelHooves' shack. The words "Be Strong!" were barely visible where the base was set into the granite. His little pony would watch over him forever. The spirit of Applejack would never leave his side.

⁂

I rolled slowly down the hall of Stable Twenty-Nine, my thoughts filled with shadows and regrets and pain. I'd failed SteelHooves. He was dead, and I had failed him. He'd only asked the one thing of me. He'd asked me to save just one pony. But I had left Star Sparkle in Canterlot, and now she was dead.

I wondered if the Enclave even knew they had wiped out a village of ponies. If they had bothered to check before they started their attack. If they even cared.

I reached the end of the hall and looked up at the lit banner above the door: Vinyl Scratch. I lifted a hoof and clopped it against the door. "Velvet?"

A voice drifted out from inside. "I want to be alone!"

"Velvet, please…" I knew she was taking the loss of SteelHooves hard, but I had begun to really worry when Calamity had told me she had locked herself in Vinyl

Scratch's room. "…it's time for us to go."

"I *said* I wanted to be alone!" she shouted from behind the door, making me flinch.

"Velvet?…" Something was wrong. Even more wrong than I knew. "Please, talk to me."

I heard the door unlock. The metal slid away with a pneumatic hiss. Velvet Remedy was standing there, looking wrecked, a cross expression on her face. Her horn was glowing.

"You don't want to talk to me right now, Littlepip. Now go."

I focused, beginning to roll inside. She telekinetically threw something at me, hitting me in the chest. I looked down at the object which had bounced off me and fallen into my lap. It was a box of memory orbs.

SteelHooves' memory orbs.

"You knew!" Velvet said firmly but surprisingly without accusation. "Calamity told me that much. But I didn't realize SteelHooves knew too. All of you did."

Oh Goddess! She'd looked at his memories. She'd seen him dying on the battlefield the day that Fluttershy first tested the megaspells!

"Velvet…" I began only to find there was nothing I could possibly say other than, "I'm sorry."

"Just. Go."

I choked. "I… I was trying… I should have…"

"Told me?" she questioned, a pained smirk crossing her muzzle. "I know why you didn't. You were trying to spare me the truth. Trying to save me. And others, I suspect. That's what you do, isn't it?"

There was something in her voice I deeply disliked. I had been fearing this day for weeks, sure that the truth about Fluttershy's role in the end of things would devastate Velvet Remedy. But I was expecting rage, screaming… not this.

"Fluttershy… she made a mistake," I offered, wanting to tell Velvet that the megaspell bombs weren't really Fluttershy's fault. That all the death and destruction shouldn't be laid at her idol's hooves. That it was okay to still love Fluttershy. "She created…"

"Fluttershy created something beautiful," Velvet Remedy interjected sternly, brooking no room for argument. "The only mistake she made was that she gave it to anypony."

That… well, I should be relieved to hear her say that, right? So why wasn't I?

"Now if you'll excuse me, I want to be alone," she said gravely. "I don't think I can travel with you anymore."

"What?" I breathed, my wounded heart breaking. I couldn't lose another friend! Not now. "W-why?"

Velvet Remedy huffed, becoming truly cross. "You really want to leave, Littlepip, before I say something we will both regret!" She began to walk away, trying to close the door behind her. It refused to shut, sensing that I was in the way.

"But…"

Velvet Remedy spun, stomping. "Fluttershy's mistake was giving the megaspells to other ponies. She'd created magics of life and healing. How could I not love her for that?" She glared, "But it was beyond naïve to think she could give megaspells to anyone without them being turned into something horrible!"

I fought to respond but my brain wasn't working. I felt paralyzed as I watched one of my dearest friends seem to self-destruct.

"Oh, I understand why she thought other ponies would use the spells for good. I've been just as stupid. I've spent all my life wanting to help ponies because I've held to this idiotic, naïve belief that, deep inside, we are inherently good. That we deserve to be helped. To be saved."

Her words were giving me unpleasant flashbacks to Mister Topaz. "We… we are basically good."

Velvet Remedy laughed a broken, nasty laugh. "Haven't you been paying attention, Littlepip?" she scolded. "Did you somehow miss Arbu? How about Fluttershy's Cottage? Or every other damn thing we've seen?" She shook her head. "Deep inside, we're all raiders."

My muzzle hung open. "No! That's not true." I knew Velvet Remedy was hurting. I prayed this was her pain speaking. I couldn't bear seeing her like this.

"No?" she countered. "Even the best of us fall to evil at the drop of a hat. Do you know what the worst thing I have ever done in my life was?" I suspected she was about to bring up killing the raiders in Fluttershy's home, but she surprised me. "It was when I tried to use you to make Calamity jealous. I knew you loved me, and I…"

She lowered her head. "It was horrible. What I tried to do was cruel and *unkind.* I didn't deserve forgiveness."

I wanted to reach out and hug her. To hold her. "But I forgave you," I told her softly. "We all have moments of…"

"Evil?" she interrupted. "That's the point, Littlepip. Hell, you're possibly the most selfless, noble pony in the wasteland, and look at what you've done. We're here attending SteelHooves' funeral because you decided to set off a megaspell in their den."

I reeled as if she had bucked me.

"Honestly, I know you just think of them as monsters. And I even know why you had to do it. The Goddess was a threat to everyone and everything. But… you blew up their *home* to get at her, Littlepip!"

Oh Goddesses!

"You massacred all those monster families with their little monster children." Her tone was sad and without malice, but each word slammed into me with the force of a sledgehammer. "Honestly, what did you expect them to do? Roll over? Play dead?"

She looked directly into my eyes. "SteelHooves is dead because of what you did." My whole body went numb. "And the worst part is that it was the right thing to do."

All of this… SteelHooves' death… it was all my fault!

"And you are the best of us." She reached up and pushed me out of the doorway with a hoof. "I'm not coming with you, Littlepip. I can't help save the wasteland if I can't believe the ponies in it are worth saving."

The metal door slid shut between us.

I fell out of my wheelchair and curled up on the floor, hurt beyond the telling of it.

Finally, the tears came. And they wouldn't stop.

* * *

Calamity came looking for me. I didn't want to move. I wanted to just die.

"I… I did this," I moaned, unable to cry anymore.

"Now ya stop that right now, y'hear?" Calamity ordered. "Ya risked yer own life an' nearly lost it savin' the Equestrian Wasteland from one o' the biggest threats Ah could imagine. Yer a big damn hero, and Ah won't stand fer none of this self-pity."

"That bomb killed… how many?" Hellhounds, pegasi. How many unintended dead. Just to take out the Goddess. I imagined even Red Eye would be appalled at how I had discarded my morals.

"Way Ah see it, ya saved everypony," Calamity told me. "An' weren't yer fault the damn Enclave showed up when they did. Nopony coulda predicted that."

"How about the hellhounds?"

Calamity nickered. "Aw, dammit, Velvet!" He stomped. "The hellhounds are nothin' but murderous, territorial monsters who kill ponies indiscriminately. They have been fer centuries. Y'all saved countless lives by wipin' so many o' 'em out."

He was right, but that didn't stop me from thinking of magical dragon's fire burning away monster families filled with helpless, screaming children.

"Let's go get ya well, Li'lpip."

I blinked, looking up at him. "You're coming with me?"

I was actually surprised that the pegasus nodded. "Ah want t' stay with Velvet. Be here for her," Calamity told me, flapping his wings in his discomfort. "But y'all need t' get t' Manehattan. An' it ain't safe fer y'all t' travel alone. A sick heroine an' a ghoul merchant?" He shook his head. "She'll be hurtin' somethin' fierce, but if Ah don't come along, Ah reckon ya might not make it. An' Ah ain't aimin' t' lose any more friends this week."

Manehattan. Homage. My heart was bleeding out. I needed her so badly. But the idea of seeing her again filled me with dread. How could she possibly want anything to do with me after all I had done. After what I had become.

He leaned down and gave me a nuzzle. "Especially not muh first one."

I felt a brush of warmth against my bleak, dying heart. "Thank you. I… I'm sorry for pulling you away from her."

"From what Ah gather, y'all 'ave given 'er more help than Ah could. If there's any way outta the darkness she's in right now, those little statue thingies are the best guides she could hope fer."

Sometimes, my pegasus friend was startlingly wise.

⁂

Calamity and I huddled together in the back of the delivery wagon, clad in anti-radiation barding. (Our ghoul friend had smiled broadly as she produced the second suit from the back of the wagon, this one tailored for a pegasus stallion. I was beginning to think Ditzy Doo really did carry *absolutely everything* we might need.) Calamity had strapped his battle saddle on over the anti-radiation barding, foregoing his normal armor. Even with the barding, we were having to consume RadAway at least once every hour. Calamity didn't have to be in here with me, but he insisted. I was both thankful and annoyed with him for it.

Calamity didn't want to risk taking the *Sky Bandit* into Manehattan. Crossroads had confirmed reports of a lot of Enclave operating within the city. So we would either have to go in on hoof, or in Ditzy Doo's wagon.

The trip shouldn't take more than a few hours. We were going to stop at Tenpony Tower first, drop me off. Then Calamity was going to go with Ditzy Doo to Friendship City. If Homage would still have me, I hoped to spend a week wrapped in her embrace.

"Aw pony feathers," Calamity said, looking up from our fourteenth game. "Best of thirty-nine?" I was beginning to suspect he was letting me win. Really, nopony could be this bad at Tic-Tac-Toe.

I felt the wagon slow.

"Aw hell," Calamity spat as two Enclave pegasi shot past the wagon and yawed, circling back towards us.

"Halt, pegasus!" one of them called out, her armor magnifying her voice and altering it with an intimidating reverb, **"Identi… great leaders, what the hell is that thing?!"**

Not good.

Tzzrartch! Tzzrartch!

"They're shooting at us?" I gasped. The two Enclave pegasi had opened fire on Ditzy Doo!

The wagon went into an abrupt dive. Calamity and I tumbled against the wall of the wagon along with several crates. One, containing dozens of packets of RadAway, spilled open, scattering glowing orange packets. Several fell through the window that looked out the front of the wagon.

I pulled myself to the window and peeked out as the wagon began to pull up, twisting as Ditzy Doo made a hard turn, weaving through the piers of the Luna Line. Smoke curled off a hole in her lead barding just behind her left wing, glowing ichor seeping from her wounded flesh.

Tzzrartch! Tzzrartch!

Above me, part of the roof glowed, a hole the size of a foal disintegrating away. I floated out Little Macintosh, pushing myself onto a toppled crate until I could see one of the attacking pegasi through the opening. I slid into S.A.T.S.

Calamity launched himself out of the back of the wagon, taking wing as I fired several shots into the black carapace of the Enclave soldier. Two of the bullets glanced off the armor, but the third penetrated. I ducked back down, needing to reload with either armor-piercing or magical bullets.

Tzzrartch!

The wagon shifted again, all of the crates sliding towards the open rear gate as Ditzy Doo tried to gain altitude. I cast out a levitation net, trying to keep Ditzy Doo from losing all the wares she was carrying. A bolt of magical energy flew into the wagon, striking one of the metal boxes and melting it, destroying whatever had been inside.

I could hear Calamity's battle saddle firing. "Deadshot" Calamity. I was sure he hit his mark.

One of the Enclave pegasi was swooping in right behind us. The gems in her battle saddle crackled, glowing brighter as the pegasus switched to more powerfully charged sparkle packs. I lifted Little Macintosh, my targeting spell allowing me to lock onto the pegasus' head. I hadn't had time to swap bullets, but if I could hit the visor, I was sure my shot would go through.

I was thrown back violently as Ditzy Doo suddenly came to a complete stop. The chasing pegasus tried to pull up, but slammed jarringly into the back of the wagon's roof.

We started moving again as the black carapace-clad pegasi dropped to the ground, unconscious.

I was cleaning up the crates, levitating them into order when Calamity flew back in.

"Sorry, Li'lpip, but Ah couldn't bring muhself t' kill the fellow," he said, his muzzle etched in a grimace. "Ah grounded 'im wi' a shot through the wing, but we're likely t' have more trouble from that lot." He looked away. Ah used t' be one o' those soldiers."

I understood. "Do you want to talk about it?" Calamity shook his head.

"Not right yet. Let's get ya better first," he said, looking for time. "But yeah, Ah reckon Ah'm gonna have to talk 'bout this, and sooner than later."

* * *

"Oh it just keeps getting better," I groaned as we spotted the Enclave array on the top of Tenpony Tower. Ditzy Doo veered away, looking for a safe place to land, someplace out of sight. We would have to approach Tenpony on hoof. Or, more precisely, I would. The Enclave presence in Tenpony meant that it was no place for either of my pegasi friends.

A memory resurfaced.

Open it back up! Ambrosia had yelled, ordering me as the antenna-like weapons of her battle saddle had glowed threateningly. *You open this room right now, or I swear by the Council I will teach you what it's like to melt!*

I can't. I had tried to reason with her. *I'm as trapped as you are. This room can only be opened from the outside.* And, based on the videos I had seen on my first trip to Maripony, only by the Goddess.

That was all. Just a flash. A fragment of those thirty-plus minutes I was missing.

Ditzy Doo landed in the darkened mouth of a crumbling chariot-wash. She unhitched herself from the wagon, digging a healing potion out of the mailbag slung at her side.

"Ditzy Doo? Calamity? Would you wait here for me?" I asked plaintively. "Just a few hours. In case I can't get in? Or something goes wrong?" In case Homage kicks me out.

Ditzy Doo nodded swiftly. Then dropped her chalkboard and wrote a single word:

"Muffins?"

I smiled. "If I can get Homage to bake some more, absolutely!"

A few minutes later, I was walking through the rubble towards Tenpony Tower. The building seemed so much more imposing from street level. It towered upwards, the only truly intact building anywhere close to its size, rising out of the graveyard of Manehattan like a lighthouse, serving as both beacon and warning.

My hooves trod between emptied cans of food, old campfires and a dozen other reminders that part of Red Eye's army had camped around the tower, cutting it off from the rest of the Equestrian Wasteland, threatening to destroy it with a balefire bomb.

The balefire bomb I had talked Red Eye into sending to Splendid Valley so I could use it to kill the Goddess and destroy the Black Book. And kill countless others, including SteelHooves, in the act of it. The thought clawed at my heart. The little pony in my head wept quietly.

I stopped, leaning against a giant "S", one of the more intact letters which had come crashing down from the face of the building. I wasn't breathing right. I wanted to collapse again, and I couldn't tell if it was from the sorrow threatening to overwhelm me, or the weakness that was wrecking my body. They felt like one and the same.

Ahead, I saw the main entrance to Tenpony Tower had been armored over. The whole lower floors were barricaded with a yard of magically-fused rubble. The only way in, other than the roof, was through the Four Stars station above me. I had known this, of course. But it didn't make the idea of levitating up to the station any less exhausting.

I looked upwards, and saw the black, insectoid form of an armored Enclave soldier striding across one of the tracks above me. With a flick of my hoof, I turned on the MG StealthBuck II and became invisible.

* * *

"What do you mean, she's not here?!" I cried as I followed Life Bloom.

Life Bloom led me though the secret parts of Tenpony Tower. Places that neither the citizens of the tower nor its new, armor-clad guests knew of.

"Just that, Littlepip," Life Bloom affirmed. "The Enclave shut down her broadcast. Apparently, they have the ability to override whatever any of the rest of us are doing with those towers…"

But… it will still be my project, right? Rainbow Dash had asked. *It will still be the Ministry of Awesome?*

The Enclave didn't control the central hub for the Single Pegasus Project, but they controlled who knew how many Ministry of Awesome hubs above the clouds. And Rainbow Dash had assured that the Ministry of Awesome had overriding authority.

I knew my Homage. She wouldn't stand for being shut down. She would see the truth got out if it killed her. "When did she leave?" I asked, worried more for her now than I had been when Tenpony Tower faced Red Eye's bomb. That, at least, I had been in a position to prevent.

"Yesterday morning, just a few hours after they took control of the airwaves," Life Bloom told me as we reached the chamber where he would purge the taint still trapped in my body. "She took a bunch of those override devices like the one she gave you for the Fillydelphia Tower. Said she had an idea."

"You go Homage!" I whispered, wanting to cheer for her despite my worries and fears.

* * *

Ditzy Doo's hooves touched down on the docks of Friendship Island.

"Oddly nice, bein' able t' approach Friendship City without bein' shot at, ain't it?" Calamity asked me as he hopped out the back of the wagon.

"Ayep," I said, mimicking his accent decently. He chuckled.

Ditzy Doo detached from the wagon and shook herself, the lead-lined cloak fluttering. She had been disappointed but understanding about the lack of muffins. Calamity had been concerned when my stay at Tenpony Tower had proved so short lived. But without Homage, and with pegasi in black carapace-like armor walking through the public areas of the ritzy building, I had found myself without reason or desire to stay. Watching a couple armored Enclave ponies looking into the window of my locked-up former cheese shop as they chatted about how they should require "hero discounts" was the final buck that drove me back outside.

A guardpony was approaching us, her eyes shifting between the two pegasi. "So, it's a visit from the great and benevolent Enclave, is it?"

Calamity coughed, stomping a bit. "Not hardly."

"Really?" the guard asked, moving closer. "Then let me see your flank."

I raised an eyebrow at that, but Calamity turned, taking the anti-radiation barding in his teeth and pulling it up over his flank, revealing the scar in the shape of a cloud and lightning bolt that had destroyed his cutie mark.

"All right then," the guard mare said, relaxing visibly. "Welcome to Friendship City." She gave us a pleasant smile. Her eyes scanned over the wagon then looked at Ditzy Doo, widening in surprise. "Ditzy? The *Wasteland Survival Guide* Ditzy?"

Ditzy Doo gave a happy clop at the recognition.

"DJ Pon3 had said you were a ghoul, but he never said you were a glowing one!"

Ditzy Doo set down her chalkboard and wrote on it before kicking it over to the guard: "Glow is new. Too much Splendid Valley. Friendship City can fix?"

The guard read the chalkboard and looked uncertain but hopeful. "Well, if there is anypony who could help, it would be Doctor Freshwater. She's in charge of the science station built into Friendship Island. She created the water purifiers about a decade back, and has spent the last few years working on unlocking the mysteries of what she calls the Children of the Bombs."

"Cheery," I thought aloud, suspecting that I might very well fit into that category.

Life Bloom had magically purged me of taint, but I had been exposed to a lot of it, both through direct contact with the dirty I.M.P. lake in Maripony and later in trace aerosol amounts from the leak in the safe room. According to Life Bloom, all my internal organs were in the right places, and I hadn't started to change size or grow wings, but the taint had altered me on a fundamental biological level. According to the unicorn, I was closer to being an alicorn than to being a pony.

I did not consider this a good thing. The Goddess claimed the alicorns were improved and superior, better suited than ponies to survive and thrive in the new world, and their natural successors. I just felt a stranger in my own skin.

The guard gave me a look. "And anything I can help you with, friend?"

I thought a moment. "We're here to help Ditzy Doo, and we'll be staying as long as that takes. Can you give us a quick picture of Friendship City?"

The guard nodded. "You bet I can. Basic rundown is this: Friendship City tries to be a good place for decent ponies to live with as much freedom and safety as we can offer. The Island makes that pretty easy. We don't get much trouble from raiders or slavers out here. Usually, just the occasional sea serpent or radigator. We occasionally get refugees or folks looking to settle down. We do the best we can for them, although we're beginning to run out of room. Raspberry Tart wants to start building shacks around the base of the main city, but Mayor Black Seas is impeding the expansion. She doesn't want Friendship Island becoming a shantytown."

I nodded, taking mental notes.

"Friendship City is run by a council of three august ponies. Doctor Freshwater, who I already told you heads up the science station, Mayor Black Seas, who speaks for the general citizenry, and Chief Lantern, who is head of the guard.

"If you are looking for temporary housing, your best bet is the Warm Smiles Inn. You can also seek refuge in the Common Room for free, but I don't recommend it," the guard scowled. "The place is run by Raspberry Tart. Mayor says she runs things crooked. Don't know about that, but I do know she takes advantage of the lack of supervision she had fostered around that place."

Ditzy Doo bristled and neighed, stomping a hoof. At my questioning look, she trotted over and recovered her chalkboard, erasing it with her hoof and writing: "R.T. does bad business. No muffins for her."

The guard began to lead us around to the science station entrance which back-doored onto to the docks. Despite the city's name, the entrance looked anything but friendly. Thick armored slabs operated by pneumatics sealed the science station with armor-shielded turrets covering the approach. There was no lock and no terminal. Just a camera. The door could only be opened by somepony inside. A little green mat of faux grass and white flowers lay at the foot of the door saying "welcome".

"Raspberry Tart is the head of the merchant's union. Mayor Black Seas says she's building a case to get her thrown out of the city, but the others won't act unless they have proof, for fear that she'll take too many of the merchants with her." The guard rolled her eyes. "That is, assuming she could even get out the front door."

The guard waved a hoof at the camera, smiling. I heard the turrets power down as the thick slabs slid open with a deep-throated hiss.

"Now I'm afraid you will have to turn in your weapons at the door," the guard mare cautioned, "Friendship City is a friendly place, friends, and we want to keep it that way. You'll get them back once you leave. I recommend you take a moment to introduce yourselves to Mayor Black Seas as soon as you get Ditzy Doo settled in. You'll find her in Black Seas Supplies." She then smiled to Calamity. "And I imagine you'll want to be paying a visit to Radar, our resident Dashite."

Calamity gaped in dumbfounded surprise. "Radar's still alive?" he gasped. "An' he's *here?"*

"Yes indeed. Ancient as dirt, but still flapping his wings. He was in charge of the science station back when Friendship City was founded. Helped turn the city into the place it is."

I blinked, suddenly remembering a chapter from the *Wasteland Survival Guide* on the founding of some city somewhere. I had only skimmed the chapter at the time I read the book; after all, I had been more interested in basic survival tips than grandiose concepts like settlement building. And then I remembered Calamity's assertion that a pegasus had helped string up the rope bridges connecting the freestanding sections of Friendship Bridge.

The guard grinned at Calamity's expression. "I take it you weren't really expecting to see another Dashite in your lifetime."

I giggled at my companion. "Might want to pick up your jaw before you come in."

* * *

Calamity was turning in his battle saddle at the guard station just inside when a water-blue unicorn pony with a short shock of raspberry mane and a matching short tail trotted up with a sense of urgency. Dressed in her lab coat, she looked very scientific.

"Hello, everypony. Welcome to the Friendship City Science Station, where we're making a better tomorrow for all ponykind. Please, please come in," she encouraged. "I'm Doctor Freshwater. This is my facility. Please make yourselves at home. Don't touch anything."

She shook my hoof then spun immediately to Ditzy.

"Ditzy Doo, is it?" Doctor Freshwater asked, floating on a pair of glasses and trotting over to get a closer look at our glowing ghoul pegasus. She floated out a small device that began to clickity-click just like the radiation sensor on my PipBuck.

Ditzy Doo nodded, apparently at ease with the abrupt invasion of personal space.

"Let's quickly get you to the radiation testing chamber, shall we? My, your output is impressive. And this is a new condition? When did you become like this? Where did you get such exposure? No, no, don't stop to write anything, just come along." The doctor was already trotting away, motioning with her tail for Ditzy Doo to follow. "Let's get you all hooked up."

Ditzy Doo glanced back over her wings, giving us a look that I couldn't interpret because her eyes were doing that weird thing of hers again. Then she fluttered off after an impatient Doctor Freshwater who seemed eager to poke and prod her in the name of science.

"She'll be all right, won't she?" I asked a passing lab pony.

"Oh, yeah sure," the pony drawled. "Once she's got da glowin' one strapped in, she'll stay on da safe side of da glass."

"I meant Ditzy Doo," I said crossly as the lab pony ambled away.

"Ah'm sure she'll be fine," Calamity assured me as he flew up next to me, battle saddle-free. "Doctor Freshwater seemed a bit odd, sure. But if she c'n help Ditzy Doo go back t' Silver Bell any faster, Ah'm sure the ol' mare will be happy t' put up with the tests."

I shuddered, disliking the idea. This was why we were here, why Ditzy had wanted to come, but that didn't make me feel comfortable with it. I hoped they did right by her.

* * *

"Zebra potions," the elderly pegasus insisted proudly when Calamity rather bluntly asked about his longevity. Radar thumped a sienna hoof against his chest (wincing slightly) and exclaimed, "Ain't nothin' better. Them stripers have unlocked all manner o' secrets with their brewin's. Yew'd be amazed!"

"Actually, I can believe it," I told the wrinkled, old sienna pony whose close-cropped mane might have been white even before the turn of the century. I chuckled, eyeing Calamity who looked caught between an urge to dash and a desire to break into squees of "ohmygosh". It was a reunion he had never expected with a pony he had never known, but the mere idea that he wasn't the only Dashite in the Equestrian Wasteland seemed to have overwhelmed him.

"That darned upstart youngin' Freshwater may have usurped my position on the city council, even taken over my place as head researcher, but she can't force me t' retire! Not while there's plenty o' life an' mind in me," Radar insisted. "I'm as fit as I ever was."

To prove it, the old pegasus stretched out his wings and flew halfway across his loft in the back of the science station. He made it three full yards before having to land, wheezing frightfully.

"Whoa there," Calamity said, the spell he seemed to be under breaking. He flew up to the wobbling elderly pegasus, trying up to steady him. But Radar pushed the younger Dashite away.

"I said I was fit. Don't need no help!" He looked between us. "Now, who are yew folk and what can ol' Radar do yew fer?"

"Ah'm, Calamity," my friend said warmly, "An' this muh best friend, Li'lpip. Ah'm a Dashite, down from the clouds fer 'bout seven years now. Ah thought Ah was the only one around. Ah mean, Ah heard stories o' ya, but ya left the Enclave so long ago…"

"And now they've come back," Radar pointed out. "Helluva bad bit o' timin'." Calamity nodded morosely. Radar looked Calamity up and down. "Tell me, what d'yew think they're here fer?"

"Ah don't know," Calamity admitted. "But Ah don't think they're here t' 'Save the Wasteland'."

The elderly pegasus smirked. "Ahh, so yew don't buy the horseapples they're shovelin' over the radio none either." Calamity shook his head. "Good buck. I was beginnin' t' think it was jus' me."

"And yew, what's yer name," Radar turned to me. "And how 'bout yew, youngin'? Yew think they come down from the big ol' sky t' save yer tail?"

"Littlepip," I reminded him. "And no. No I definitely don't."

Radar smiled, nodding sagely. "Well, way I see it, it's got t' do with the Sustainable Pegasus Project. That's the key t' the Enclave's power."

"How so?" I asked.

"Agriculture, yew silly 'corn," Radar stated. "Without the towers, the Enclave can't feed the ponies. The pegasi wouldn't be able t' survive cut off above the cloud curtain."

Remember when ya asked about what we ate up here, an' Ah joked 'bout cloud seedin'? Calamity had told us, referring to a conversation we had the morning after the Pinkie Bell farm. *I dunno what them towers were originally meant t' do. But Ah know what the Enclave has repurposed 'em t' do. And that's t' enchant the clouds fer miles around 'em so that we c'n grow crops right up in the sky.*

"Without that," Radar insisted, "the Enclave falls."

"Red Eye plans to take control of the… S.P.P. He wants to control the weather."

Radar scoffed, muttering under his breath. "Good luck with that."

I remembered what Calamity said back in Spike's Cave:

Only time they c'n act as one is when they're feelin' threatened.

"Then, from their perspective," Radar surmised, "It's him or them."

"Luna's shuddering moonquakes," I cursed (getting a raised eyebrow from the elderly pegasus and a whispered "she does this a lot" from Calamity). "We *could* have seen this coming."

I looked at Calamity in sullen weariness. "When we first learned that Red Eye was messing with the Fillydelphia Tower, we could have at least guessed the Enclave would be stepping in sooner or later. By the time we had left Canterlot, we should have known for sure." I bit my lower lip.

"It was only a matter of time. The moment they cottoned on to Red Eye's plan…"

"Ain't like the Enclave 'as been payin' the Equestrian Wasteland all that much attention," Calamity told me. "Least it never seemed like they did t' me. Few scoutin' parties every year…"

"Wait!" Radar suddenly flew up to me, his snout pressing against mine. "Yew said yer name was *Littlepip?"*

"Y-yes," I stammered, taken aback.

"Yew ever been t' the Ministry o' Awesome? Before the grand an' mighty Enclave tore all o' Canterlot down from the mountain?"

* * *

I watched the monitor as Radar keyed up the sequence.

"Y'all 'ave been in the Ministry o' Awesome?" Calamity asked Radar, unable to conceal his shock.

"Yeah, I was," Radar replied. "Was decades ago, not long after they burned my cutie mark off me. I was hopin' t' find answers." He looked at us as the monitor came to life, showing first static and then a scene of the MAw basement, the shield dominating the center. "I didn't get no farther than the security station, and I zoomed outta there leaving the whole damn place on high alert behind me. But I did manage to snatch up this little gem from the security logs."

I watched the monitor. The timestamp on the log was old. A few years post-apocalypse.

"What did you mean, 'good luck with that'?" I asked as I watched the minutes tick by on the recording.

"What now?"

"When I said Red Eye was planning to take over the S.P.P.," I reminded him. "You said 'good luck with that'."

Radar made a sound of understanding. "Well, the whole damn Enclave's been tryin' t' get inta the central hub fer generations now. If they can't do it, I don't see how Red Eye has a chance."

"He's got a plan," I said confidently.

"Does he now?" Radar scoffed. "Well, I'd love t' hear it. Cuz that place is locked up tighter than my ex-wife's anus…"

Oh Goddesses, how I did not need the images that conjured.

"…Place has the best defenses Equestria could build. Has a super shield 'round it so powerful nothin' had been able t' penetrate it. S'pose it has super guns too, but they're all inside the shield and that shield is so overdesigned that they're pretty much useless."

"Ah know that the Enclave has built a whole base 'round it," Calamity added. "Whole mass o' troops just t' guard a place nopony can get into."

Radar chuckled, grinning at Calamity. "Never found anypony who could get through. Enclave High Council figures the shield's keyed only t' Rainbow Dash herself. An' Dash had no survivin' kin. So when she left, she pretty much screwed the powers that were outta their prize."

"Bet they took *that* well," Calamity grinned back.

"Deemed her a traitor, what they did," Radar spat. "Sent griffin mercs t' kill her and bring back her head. Hoped somepony wearin' Rainbow Dash around their neck might be able t' walk through."

Calamity and I both gasped in horror.

I turned from the monitor. "The Enclave wanted… that's… Goddesses!"

Radar agreed grimly, correcting me in one point, "Well, they weren't 'xactly the Enclave quite yet. But they were gettin' there right quick."

"What happened?"

Radar stated simply, "Well, either they ain't never got her head, or they did and it didn't work."

"Pinkie Pie?" Rainbow Dash's voice floated up from the monitor. I shifted back to see the rather bedraggled cyan pegasus walking into the basement. The security camera zoomed in, following her. "You here?"

"Pinkie Pie?" she tried again, sounding so small in the vast room. "I brought them, just like you asked. What's this about?"

Her words echoed off the walls. The light of hope in her wide eyes slowly diminished.

Rainbow Dash stopped a few yards in front of the shield, the magical light painting shadows across her features as she looked around. "You weren't kidding about the health potions, by the way. I'm down to my last one, and I still need to make it out of that pink stew outside. That stuff is… awful."

The room remained still and silent. The light in her eyes went out entirely, her expression becoming painfully sad. "You're not here, are you?" Rainbow Dash asked the emptiness around her. "I guess that means you didn't make it either."

Rainbow Dash stepped solemnly through the shield. She walked up to the little pedestal sitting at its center and the memory orb box resting upon it, its lid slightly ajar. Rainbow Dash nudged it open with her nose, revealing three memory orbs and spaces for three more. The second, third and fifth were missing.

"I don't know what you needed these for, or who this Littlepip you mentioned in your note is, but I hope it's as important as you said it is," Rainbow Dash frowned, her voice soft and sad. She reached into her saddle bags and pulled a memory orb out with her teeth, gently setting it in the spot reserved for the butterfly orb.

"Wasn't easy getting these things, especially with Gilda on my tail. But even she isn't brave enough to follow me into what's become of Canterlot. Much less my own Ministry." She put the star orb into its resting place. "But she's waiting for me out there, and after that pink crap, I'm not sure I can take her."

Rainbow Dash fished the final memory orb, the one to be placed in the holder with her own cutie mark. She paused, staring at the little emblem of the cloud and its rainbow lightning bolt. Then sighed and put the orb into its place.

Rainbow Dash shifted her attention to the orb in the fourth holder. The balloon orb. "But I trust you. You know that. You said this was important, and I believe you And I wouldn't leave my friend hanging. Even… even after she was…" the last word was barely a whisper, "…gone."

A single tear trailed down her cheek as she gave a weary smirk. "One last prank, right? Together as always."

She lifted a hoof and pressed the orb box closed, the click of the lock loud in the sepulcher room.

I reached out and touched the monitor screen, tears welling in my own eyes.

Rainbow Dash turned and started to walk away. As she reached the inside of the shield, she stopped. Her face screwed up with determination.

“But you know what, Pinkie? Since you’re not here, I’m changing the rules.” Rainbow Dash spun around and trotted over to the maneframe on the far side of the shielded area. “If somepony comes poking around in here, I want to know. I’m setting an alarm to go off in every Ministry of Awesome hub. If I’m still alive, I want to meet this Littlepip of yours.”

Dash paused. “Sorry Pinks,” she said, looking back over her shoulder. “I hope you don’t mind.”

I watched the rest of the recording in stunned, comprehending silence.

* * *

Friendship City rose above us – concentric rings of stores and homes, connected by walkways and platforms that spun out from a central spiraling stairwell ascending through the chimney-like open space like a plume of smoke rising to the head of the Pony of Friendship.

Crowds of ponies moved up and down the spiral stair, diverting onto the catwalks and merging with the traffic that surrounded the layers of scavenged-material structures built into the interior walls of the massive statue – a city built from junk, a fair portion of it pulled from ships which had sunk in the harbor. A small forest of support beams further congested the lower levels.

Ponies gathered around a watering hole called Sparkle’s, run by a friendly but slightly frazzled mare with the cutie mark of a Sparkle~Cola on her flank. Her assistants moved between tables nearby, taking orders and delivering homogenous, deep-fried foodstuffs. From a radio nearby blared the sound of heavy horns, marching drums and rumbling thunder. Enclave music.

Ponies stopped to stare at us as Calamity and I walked through Friendship City. Conversations died on unfinished sentences. For once, their gazes weren’t oppressing me; it was the presence of a pegasus in their midst that snatched their attention. Invariably, their eyes would quickly search out Calamity’s flank.

We no longer wore the anti-radiation barding, having left it with one of Doctor Freshwater’s more amiable assistants. Without barding or battle saddle, Calamity looked strangely naked beneath his desperado hat. At the sight of Calamity’s Dashite brand, nervous faces broke into smiles. We were soon mobbed by strangers wherever we went, all offering friendly greetings to my pegasus friend and his little mare companion.

I had garnered no attention at all until two Friendship City Security guards approached wearing heavy barding in cheery pastel colors that closely matched their manes.

“Welcome to Friendship City, Calamity,” one of them smiled, offering a hoof. Word of our visit had spread faster than the crowds had allowed us to travel. “And you must be the Stable Dweller that DJ Pon3 keeps cheering. It’s an honor to meet you, miss.”

I felt myself blushing hard as I stared up at the security pony.

"Sorry 'bout shooting at you last week," the pony said, looking chagrinned, offering me his hoof.

I was reaching out to shake it when his dour partner groused sullenly, "I'm not." I froze.

The guard looked to his partner in dismay, but the other guard pony stood her ground. "She shot those foals' parents right in front of them," she said, glaring at me. "With bullets of fire."

My hoof dropped back to the scrap metal floor.

"They call you hellmare, you know," the guard glowered. "The kids."

The other guard, the buck, put a hoof over his face in embarrassment. "All right, Night Bright. Let's just go." He looked at us regretfully. "Sorry 'bout that, folks."

As the two guards moved away, Night Bright looked back over her shoulder and mouthed slowly: Bullets. Of. Fire.

* * *

"Welcome to Black Seas Supplies," the black-maned indigo mare at the counter greeted us genially as she took in the sight of us. "My name's Black Seas. I'm the mayor of this fine city, and owner of this fine store. And you must be Littlepip and Calamity." She smiled. "Word gets around. Thank you for stopping in. What can I do for you today?"

I looked around, feeling dazed. The small cargo ship that Black Seas Supplies was built out of had been cut apart and imported into the Pony of Friendship, then rebuilt almost completely. Metal flooring and rows of shelves had been welded into the hold. Narrow metal stairs led up to the living quarters which had once been the captain's cabin. An old-model precursor to the terminal – a combination of monitor and intercom system – was built into the wall behind a counter that looked like it had been scavenged from a diner.

Calamity fluttered forward to greet Mayor Black Seas. "Pleased t' meetcha," he grinned back affably. "Mind if Ah take a poke 'round yer store? Ah'm lookin' t' do some tradin'."

"Well, that's a damn fine coincidence," Black Seas grinned back. "That's what Black Seas Supplies is here for, after all. We got about everything you might be looking for. Here, let me show you…"

I watched in foggy amusement as Black Seas and Calamity dove into business, my pegasus friend looking to unload a lot of what he scavenged from the Ministry of Image in return for bottle caps, ammo and medical supplies (with an emphasis on RadAway). Black Seas was a skilled and charismatic barter mare though and soon had him shopping for a gift for Velvet Remedy. Something to touch her heart and remind her that there really is good in ponies worth fighting for.

My thoughts were still drowning in the cold reminder of Arbu, leaving me detached from my surroundings and the conversation in front of me. I barely reacted when the door opened and an arsenic-colored stallion brushed by, carrying a walking stick in his muzzle. I only reacted when the stick transformed into a magical energy blaster and he fired it at the mayor.

"Tarf sayf heffo!"

Calamity was faster, flying into Black Seas, knocking her out of the path of the shot and into a shelf of lunchboxes, sensor modules and garden gnomes which rained down on the indigo mare. The blast of lethal magic struck a display of steam gauge assemblies, pulverizing it.

My first reaction was to pull out Little Macintosh, but with a start I realized my most trusted weapon was not with me. Calamity pivoted, hooves dropping to the floor as he stood between the assassin and Black Seas. The stallion shifted to get another shot, realizing he would have to take Calamity out to get at his target.

I lashed out with my telekinesis, lifting the arsenic-colored pony and pushing him against the far wall where two shelves blocked his view of both my friend and the mayor mare. I wrapped my magic around his neck, squeezing. The stallion kicked and flailed, his eyes bulging, the magical weapon dropping to the floor with a clatter.

Black Seas was climbing back onto her hooves, a couple garden gnomes rolling off her back, as the assassin lost consciousness. I released him. The mayor blinked slowly, shaking her head.

"Well, looks like your reputation as heroes is well founded," she said, wincing slightly from a sprain. "Thanks for saving my life."

"It's what we do," Calamity said, more for my benefit I suspected than hers. "Why ya reckon he was out t' kill ya?"

The mayor frowned. "I'm pretty damn sure Raspberry Tart was behind this," she proclaimed, trotting over to the old terminal. She pressed one of the buttons under the monitor and barked, "Tart! I need to speak to you *right now!*"

The indigo pony tapped her hoof impatiently. Glancing to Calamity, "Would you be a dear and tie that bastard up?" Her eyes dropped to the magical energy weapon on the floor. "How the hell did Lantern miss that?"

I stepped up to where the weapon had tumbled, floating it upwards to examine it. It was a model I had never encountered before, but then I was barely knowledgeable about magical energy weapons. "You might want to ask Grandpa Rattle about that," I suggested. The spell disguising the blaster as a stick was too similar to the old buck's magical research to be a coincidence.

I have a shotgun.

I couldn't imagine Grandpa Rattle working with murderous ponies though. At least, not willingly. I was suddenly fearful for the crazy old buck.

The monitor flickered to life, showing the face of a grossly overweight, pomegranate mare with a yellow mane and an overly-charismatic smile. "Ooh, Mayor Black Seas! How good it is to hear from you." Her words virtually oozed out of the speaker above the monitor. "And to what do I owe the honor of your call this evening?"

"You know exactly why I'm calling, you murderous bitch," Black Seas spat, stomping her hoof. "You just sent a pony to kill me."

"Laaaanguage!" she chided, her smile un-phased by the accusation. "Now, now. It is hardly befitting the mayor of our glorious city to use such foul sentiment. Or to go slinging such dreadful false accusations."

"You deny it then?" Black Seas narrowed her eyes. "Well, seeing as the would-be assassin failed, I'm sure we can put this to rest after Chief Lantern has a day or two with him in her interrogation room."

"Oh?" the blob of a mare looked surprised. "He survived then? Good. The sooner the

Chief can ferret out the true culprit, the better, no? Although it will cut into your opportunities for slander. More's the pity."

I trotted up, floating the intended murder weapon in front of me. Black Seas looked at it, then back to Raspberry Tart. "And I don't suppose you have any idea how a weapon like this could have found its way into Friendship City?"

"Shouldn't you be asking that of Chief Lantern?" she suggested.

Black Seas nickered, "We both know that anything that finds its way into Friendship City behind her back has gotten in through you."

The pomegranate mare feigned offense. "Despite what you claim, mayor, the Common Room is not a den of smugglers and thieves. And, as the voice of the ponies, I would think you should have more faith in them." Her words washed over my ears like slime. "Besides, let's be honest, if I wanted to kill you, I would never use so crude a method. I'd poison your food."

Raspberry Tart got the reaction she was looking for. Black Seas' eyes widened just for a moment before narrowing again. The overweight mare virtually purred in pleasure.

I was beginning to deeply and egregiously dislike Raspberry Tart.

"Now, be a darling and keep me informed, would you, mayor?" Raspberry Tart pressured. "As head of the merchant's union, I have a right to know about shenanigans that threaten the peace and safety of all our little ponies."

"Of course," Mayor Black Seas groused before cutting the connection.

The mayor's expression was cloudy. "Slimy worm of a mare. Now Chief Lantern will have to spare guards for this viper, just to make sure he doesn't have an unpleasantly life-ending accident before he can be questioned." She kicked one of the scattered garden gnomes. "And I'm going to be obsessing over where I get my food."

"Any way we can help?" I offered.

The mayor raised her eyebrows. "Can you get a confession?" She shook her head. "You've already helped me more than I could ask. But…" She thought a moment. "If you can sneak a listening device into her office above the Common Room, I may be able to catch her saying something about this mess that I can take to the council."

I grinned, crossing my PipBuck-bonded foreleg in front of me. "Sneaky is one of my specialties."

* * *

My plan was simple. "I'll use my StealthBuck to turn invisible. Slip past Raspberry Tart's guards and defenses. Even if she's in the room, I'll be able to plant the listening device and get out unnoticed."

I looked down at the MG StealthBuck II set into my PipLeg. I'd already used it to get in and then out of Tenpony Tower. The device hadn't had much time to recharge, but if I moved swiftly and all went well, I would only need about ten minutes.

"Ah don't like the timin' o' this," Calamity said, flying over me as I pushed my way through Friendship City towards Sparkle's. My innards had stopped queasing after Life Bloom had purged me of taint, and over the last few hours, my stomach begun to rumble, reminding me that I hadn't swallowed anything other than water and RadAway in days. At least half of my weakness was from starvation.

"You think the attack on the mayor has something to do with us?" I asked. Calamity had echoed my own concerns. For the attack to take place right after we walked into the store was a hell of a coincidence, and I was growing un-fond of coincidences.

"Well, no," Calamity admitted. "Not *us,* particularly. But 'tween Red Eye an' the Enclave an' the death o' the Goddess… there's just to much goin' down right now fer me t' believe this is jus' happenin' now by chance." He let out an growl of frustration and drooped in defeat, hanging limply from his wings. "Hell, fer all we know, the hellhounds might be plottin' this. Ponynappin' and coercion ain't 'xactly outside their limited vocabulary."

"So this could be my fault," I moaned, staring at the floor. "Add it to the list."

"Hey now," Calamity perked up, landing in front of me. "None o' this is yer fault, girl. Red Eye has been plottin' 'gainst the Goddess an' the Enclave since long b'fore y'all stepped outta that Stable," he argued with confidence. "He was workin' on ways t' get inta the Ministry o' Awesome an' chances are he'd already found one." He did already have griffins to help shut down the security systems. "All ya did was bump up the clock on the Enclave's arrival. An' Ah reckon that's prob'ly a good thing if it throws a bump under Red Eye's wagon."

I turned away, but Calamity grasped my head between his hooves and made me look at him, his wings flapping as he lifted back off the walkway.

"Yer blamin' yerself fer those dead hellhounds? Maybe even SteelHooves?" My wince betrayed me. "Well, ya c'n jus' stop that nonsense right now, y'hear? Ya got that bomb away from Red Eye an' used it t' take out a genocidal threat. What d'ya think Red Eye woulda done with it if ya hadn't?" He stared into my eyes forcefully. "At best, he'd o' done the same himself. At worst, he'd 'ave used it on a pony population center strong 'nuff t' stand in his way. Hell, he was already threatenin' Tenpony Tower with it."

I realized I was crying.

"Awww dammit, Li'lpip," Calamity said, his expression softening. "Come 'ere, now. Let me getcha somethin' t' eat."

I followed him obediently.

The crowd had thinned around Sparkle's. The waitress mares were looking thankful for the respite. The music on the radio had been replaced by an authoritative voice:

> ***"…colluding with a monstrosity in Splendid Valley which called herself The Goddess. This Goddess was the mother of the horrific alicorns who have been tormenting the Equestrian Wasteland, endangering the lives of all good ponies like yourselves. But the fiendish plot of Red Eye and the Goddess made the murders at alicorn hooves and magic pale in comparison…"***

My face slapped into Calamity's backside as the pegasus stopped abruptly, his ears up, listening.

> ***"It was their intention to rip you from your homes and from your families. To force you to endure an agonizing, taint-driven transformation that would render you into mindless slaves. Red Eye and the Goddess have been working together not just to take your freedoms or your lives, but to annihilate individuality and to devour your very souls."***

I stumbled back, shaking my head. Then joined Calamity, wondering what the Enclave was up to. "If they thought the Goddess was so bad," I whispered to my friend, "Why did they try to ally with her?"

> ***"Naturally, the Grand Pegasus Enclave could not let this stand! We may have been gone for a while, but we have not forgotten our unicorn and earth pony brothers and sisters. And we were not about to allow these abominations to violate and destroy all of you.***
>
> ***"That is why we detonated a megaspell beneath the home of the Goddess, the Maripony facility in Splendid Valley…"***

My jaw dropped, the world seeming to spin out from under me.

* * *

"Who the hell are you?" Raspberry Tart spat as she saw me. "What the hell are you doing in my loft? How did you get past my guards?"

I had planted the listening device and had been halfway out the door when the StealthBuck died.

The tub of pony flesh wobbled around to face me from her place on the lounge bed behind her desk. "Gizmo, get in here!" I felt a pony move swiftly behind me, blocking my exit.

"Gizmo, escort our uninvited guest out," the bulbous pomegranate mare requested of the stallion behind me. "Preferably through a window."

"Wait," I said, thinking swiftly. "I'm here about the contract on Black Seas."

Raspberry Tart raised a mocking eyebrow. "What contract? Ah, now I remember you. You were standing in the background when our good mayor called me up to start slinging accusations." She hefted up one of her slab-like hooves, signaling the stallion behind me to wait. "What do you want?"

The gears in my head spun. "The pony who tried to kill the mayor was sloppy. And stupid. And now the mayor trusts me." I gave her my best conspiring smile. "I could do the job easily. And correctly. But it wouldn't be cheap."

Raspberry Tart sighed. "Do you really think I'm that stupid? Did you really think you could pull the wool over my eyes that easily?"

I found myself picturing the attempt to cover her with wool – the rolls of fat, the massive jowls. "Not enough sheep in the world," I muttered aloud before I could stop myself.

She rolled her eyes. "You know, I really don't like being insulted, especially from home invaders. Gizmo, tear the little pony's legs off, would you?"

Oops! I cantered, circling to see Gizmo. My eyes widened as I took in the surgical scars and the mechanical wings. Gizmo was a cyberpony. Almost certainly a refugee from Stable 101.

Gizmo spun, spreading out his wings to slash at me. I dodged to the side, the blades of those wings whisking through the air inches from my eyes. I couldn't guess if those cybernetic wings would actually allow the earth pony to fly like a pegasus, but the feathers were razor sharp.

Gizmo somersaulted, his wings lifting and slicing through the air at me as I dove for cover, casting about for something to use as a weapon. Gizmo spun again and bucked, turning the chair I had moved behind into a battering ram that knocked me over. My armor took the blow, leaving me winded but unhurt.

"Gizmo, stop playing with your food," Raspberry Tart ordered lazily. "Just finish her already."

I scrambled for the door. Gizmo jumped up onto a couch and leapt into the air, spreading out his wings. Maybe he couldn't actually fly with them, but they allowed him to glide. He swooped across the room and landed on me with all hooves, driving me to the floor.

I focused, my horn glowing. I was weak and weaponless. But I'd fought my way through Canterlot, dammit. And Old Olneigh. There was no way I was going to fall to some two-bit crook's augmented mook!

I felt a hoof press down against the back of my head as Gizmo shifted so he could angle a wing at my neck. Then I heard the squelching sound as I telekinetically drove my screwdriver down through his ear and into his brain.

Gizmo collapsed off me, twitching. It took him almost a minute to die.

Pushing myself back up, I turned towards Raspberry Tart. "All right. Let's try that again."

"Or I could just finish you off myself."

"I don't think you could," I snarked. "I'm not a pie."

My horn glowed as I levitated Gizmo's body, pointing one of his razor wings towards her broad throat. "Now, one last time."

Raspberry Tart took fresh stock of me. "You might just be useful after all."

* * *

Chief Lantern was waiting with the mayor when Calamity and I returned to Black Seas Supplies.

"Did you get all that?" I asked eagerly the moment I trotted through the door.

"Yes," Black Seas informed me with a heavy tone, her expression cloudier than ever. I drew up short. This was not the demeanor of a mare who'd just had her rival floated to her on a silver platter. "And almost immediately after, I got a call from Raspberry Tart, reporting your attempt to barter for my murder."

I stammered. "What? Wait… I wasn't… I was just trying to get her to say something that… I wasn't actually offering…"

Chief Lantern waved a hoof. "Don't worry, girl. We know that. It would take an amazingly stupid assassin to negotiate a contract against a target she knew was listening through a device she planted herself."

Oh! I breathed a sigh of relief.

"But Raspberry Tart covered her tail. Made it look like she was just playing along in order to bring another wanna-be assassin to justice. We can't use anything she said to you against her."

Calamity bristled. "Well, how 'bout her sickin' that cyberpony on Li'lpip."

"You were invading her home," Chief Lantern told me.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter now," Mayor Black Seas claimed. "We've got bigger problems."

Calamity whinnied. "What now?"

Mayor Black Seas moved over to the terminal. "Just after she called us, Raspberry Tart made another call…" She pressed a button. An unfamiliar stallion's voice sounded through the speaker.

"Hello? Who is this?"

"Well hello to you too, darling," Raspberry Tart's voice slithered. "We're all set for your visit. I've cleared the way. When your boys get here, the doors will be open and waiting for them. The… package… they're looking for doesn't suspect a thing. But we have had one small setback…"

"Those aren't words I like," the stallion informed her coolly. "You shouldn't be telling me words I don't like."

"Mayor Black Seas is still going to be a problem," Raspberry Tart whined. The mayor and the security chief exchanged glances as they listened.

I could hear a heavy sigh through the speaker. "The mayor of that rusty monument you call a city was your responsibility. We're more than ready and capable of doing things the hard way if we meet any resistance."

"O-of course," Raspberry Tart said, sounding a little worried now.

The stallion neighed. "Personally, I would prefer the hard way. Tends not to leave loose ends."

"No, that won't be necessary, darling. How long until we can expect your arrival?"

There was a snort from the unidentified stallion. "Our Raptors are eighty minutes out. Should give you plenty of time to fix your little problem. Or flee the city."

⁂

The Enclave was coming for Friendship City.

"I… I could just turn myself over to them," I offered meekly. The ponies gathered in the council room with me stared appraisingly.

"What makes you think you are the one they are after?" Doctor Freshwater asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Well…" I grimaced. I had no reason for my assumption other than the timing and the fact that it always seemed to be me. "Who else would it be?"

"Aw hell no!" Calamity spat. He turned to the others. "Y'all ain't handin' over anypony t' the Enclave!" He paused, his determination melting into hope, "…are ya?"

The door opened behind us and Chief Lantern marched in, followed by several security ponies. "Raspberry Tart's gone. Looks like she took one of the boats."

"Good riddance," Mayor Black Seas nickered. "We can't worry about her now. Question is, do we fight, evacuate or both?"

"Do we have enough boats to evacuate everypony?" Doctor Freshwater asked, turning to the security chief. The pony shook his head sadly.

"Maybe we did about five years ago. But not anymore. We can get maybe a third of the population packed into the boats we have. Slightly less, seeing as Tart took one of them."

"To be fair," I noted disdainfully, "She kinda took a whole one up herself."

Calamity shook his head. "If their target might be on one o' those boats, they'll sink 'em all."

Chief Lantern growled. “We fight then. That’s what we have those harbor guns for.”

Doctor Freshwater looked at the others. “Are we seriously not going to put negotiation on the table? Based on that recording, they only want one pony. How can we put the lives of everypony in this city at risk for just one?” She stared at us imploringly. “Shouldn’t we even ask who they want?”

“And if it’s you?” Calamity nickered. “Then what?”

The doctor frowned. “Well, then I try to get away. Alone.”

“Can we try to communicate with them using Raspberry Tart’s terminal?” I suggested.

If I was the Enclave’s target, I was more than willing to give myself up to spare the city. And I was sure Calamity felt the same. But letting the Enclave close in on the city while we waited to find out who they were after felt like a tactical disaster. Not for the first time, I wondered what SteelHooves would recommend…

Have recommended, the little pony in my head reminded me, bringing heavy clouds of sorrow.

Chief Lantern shook his head. “Already tried that. They’re not responding.” Not a good sign.

“Sounds t’ me like they’ve decided t’ do this the hard way anyhow.”

⁂

I turned on my PipBuck radio, listening to the Enclave’s overriding broadcast in my earbloom. I didn’t expect to glean any real clue as to what they were up to, but I felt I’d better start keeping appraised of what they were saying. For the moment, I was only getting dark, funeral-esque marching anthems. SteelHooves’ funeral had been this morning, the loss of my friend wrapped my heart in chokingly tight sorrow, and the dour tones of the music were cutting at me like sharp metal wings.

Calamity was off assisting Chief Lantern. A quick inspection of the harbor guns had revealed sabotage – apparently part of Raspberry Tart’s “clearing the way” for the Enclave. The damage had been inexpert, and Calamity was certain they could have at least half of the harbor guns working again before the Enclave arrived. But they had to work fast.

I followed Doctor Freshwater to the observation room and stared through the anti-radiation window. Greenish-yellow light poured brightly through the glass. Inside, Ditzy Doo saw me approach the window and waved a wing.

A device mounted into the wall clickity-clicked, reading the ambient radiation inside the room.

“Let’s try it again,” one of the lab technicians, a cream-coated unicorn with a cornflower blue mane, spoke into a microphone. “Focus…”

The unicorn technician began to walk Ditzy Doo through the mental exercises that young unicorn fillies and colts used to practice telekinesis. But Ditzy Doo wasn’t a unicorn. She had no magic. What could they be expecting…

PFWOOSH!

The radiation counter squealed as the light in the room became momentarily blinding. Ditzy Doo tumbled to the floor comically, the burst of energy from her own body knocking her off-kilter.

"Oh very good!" the unicorn technician cheered into the microphone, clopping his hooves together in applause. "Keep that up, and you'll be able to purge yourself of this radiation in just a couple days."

Inside the chamber, Ditzy Doo pranced joyfully.

"Now, let's go again," the unicorn said with a happy chuckle. "But this time, try to keep centered so you don't keep knocking yourself over."

I smiled to Ditzy Doo and applauded too. Somehow, watching her joy made the storm clouds over my own head scatter, if just for a little while.

The music in my earbloom ended, and a voice began to speak. I turned away from the glass, listening. I didn't want Ditzy Doo to see the expressions I expected to play across my face.

> ***"Greetings, ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland. The Grand Pegasus Enclave embraces our earth-bound brothers and sisters.***
>
> ***"I know many of you are mourning the loss of Canterlot, such an iconic symbol of the Equestria That Was. But that royal city was destroyed centuries ago, and all that remained was a breeding grounds for monsters and poisons. Sometimes, in order to allow the body to heal, we must cut out the infected flesh…"***

I could feel the scowl forming on my muzzle. I didn't like where this was going. It felt like more than just excusing their attack on the Canterlot Ruins.

> ***"…burn away the diseased areas before the infection spreads…"***

I winced as a blast of static cut through the broadcast, nearly making my kick off my earbloom.

> *"Gooooooood evening, chiiiiildren!"*

DJ Pon3's voice burst over the airwaves.

> *"It's me again, your old pal, DJ Pon3! Comin' to you from a secret location somewhere in the Equestrian Wasteland. You didn't think I'd abandon the Equestrian Wasteland just because of the Enclave, didja children?*
>
> *"Now, ol' DJ Pon3 ain't got a lot of time before big sister Enclave shuts this down, so let's get right to it shall we? That's right, it's time for the news!"*

YES! The little pony in my head was bouncing around gleefully. Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!

> *"Now, first up, the truth about what went down in Maripony. Now I've got my information from irrefutable sources here, children. And I've got to admit, the Enclave is right about one thing: the Goddess was as big and bad a threat as they're making her out to be. But that's where the truth stops and the lies begin."*

Irrefutable sources, I assumed, meant she'd been watching from the towers. But wait…

> *"Now I don't know what the Enclave were out at Maripony for, but it sure as hell wasn't to take out the biggest threat the Equestrian Wasteland has ever known. No, that deed was performed by none other than your and my favorite heroine, the Stable Dweller!"*

My ears were burning, but I was too happy just hearing Homage's voice (disguised as it was) to mind.

> *"And the bomb she used to do it was the very one Red Eye was threatening Tenpony Tower with for weeks. Turns out, our heroine talked Red Eye into giving up his big trump card…"*

…oh! Irrefutable sources. Homage had watched my memories!

> *"So that casts serious doubt on the whole Red Eye-Goddess alliance the Enclave has been spouting off about. They're lying to you, children. Plain and simple. Now DJ Pon3 still doesn't know what they're up to, but I can tell you this: the Grand Pegasus Enclave are not your friends!*
>
> *"Now keep an ear out, cuz I'll be…*

Another burst of static and DJ Pon3's voice was gone.

I floated off my earbloom and held it to my breast, basking in the knowledge that Homage was out there, still alive and fighting the good fight in her own very important way.

* * *

"Attention, citizens of Friendship City!" the armor-altered voice boomed over the city's public-address loudspeakers. **"We are here to take into custody a pegasus wanted for crimes against the Grand Pegasus Enclave. His name is Radar. You can recognize him by the following brand on his flank…"**

I stared up at the nearest loudspeaker, a grey box attached to one of the support beams outside Sparkle's. I had just made it back to the watering hole and was waiting for Calamity's return when the Enclave announcement started.

I checked my PipBuck's clock. The Enclave was early! We had almost twenty more minutes. The mayor had made her own announcement, urging ponies to return to their homes, less than ten minutes ago. Mayor Black Seas had called it an "exercise", knowing that panic would cost lives. But an "exercise" didn't have a lot of motivating power. The central "chimney" wasn't anywhere close to cleared.

Our Raptors are eighty minutes out.

But their armored troops were much faster.

"…Failure to produce this pegasus and turn him over to the Enclave will be considered an act of collusion. Prompt compliance will be rewarded. Refusal will be met with force."

The ponies who had stopped to stare and listen began to panic. Ponies began racing up and down the stairs, pushing into each other. A cobalt-coated buck screamed as he was knocked over the railing, falling three stories to slam heavily into the ponies racing about the floor below.

Somewhere, the voice of a scared foal cried out.

I launched out of my seat, looking around for the source of the voice.

With a bang, the doors into the central chimney swung open and the nightmarishly-armored forms of four Enclave pegasi moved in, their scorpion-like tails curling slowly, the antenna-like integrated weapons of their Enclave armor pulsing with colored light.

"Everypony stay where you are!" one of the pegasi. **"We are the Enclave. We are here to bring one pony to justice."**

Many ponies stopped, frozen in their tracks. Others raced for the nearest doors, diving inside. I could hear the foal crying under the thunder of hundreds of frightened whispers.

"We will be searching the premises," the pegasus informed the crowd. **"Do not**

attempt to hide. Do not attempt to flee. Do not attempt to interfere. Obey, and we will be out of your manes in short order."

The pegasus beside him stepped up, as the two behind started to fan out, moving through the crowd. The pegasus called out, **"Any pony with information leading to the swift arrest of the pegasus Radar will be rewarded with a finder's fee of five thousand bits!"**

To their credit, not a single pony in Friendship City stepped up to take the offer.

"Fuck you!" a mint-coated buck shouted from the spiral stairwell.

The Enclave pony looked up at him. The gems on her armor glistened.

Fzzzzzat! The ponies around the buck scattered as he was turned into a glittering pile of ash before their eyes.

Two more ponies in the crowd broke into a run, trying to make the door of one of the shops.

Fzzzzzat! Fzzzzzat!

The glowing bolts of magical energy threaded the crowd, striking down their targets. One of the ponies vaporized, her ashes scattering across the door she had been trying to reach. The other collapsed onto her side, screaming in pain.

"I repeat: do not attempt to hide, do not attempt to flee, do not attempt to interfere. Obey."

I was trembling. If I had my sniper rifle, all four of them would be dead right now. One of the black-clad pegasi started to move through the patrons of Sparkle's. She stepped close to me, walking around behind me as she looked me over. I forced myself to stand there silently, knowing any action could put ponies in danger.

She paused, her visor turned towards the PipBuck melded to my leg. "Everfree winds!" she whispered in revulsion, moving quickly past.

I caught sight of the little, wine-colored filly curled up under the foot of the spiral stairs, shivering and whimpering. My heart went out to her. I started to inch closer, hoping I could comfort her.

I made it halfway when she saw me, her eyes opening wide with utter terror. "Hellmare!" she screamed, scrambling up and fleeing from the sight of me.

No!

Fzzzzzat!

"NO!!"

The foal's momentum had carried the glistening pink ash as she glowed and disintegrated, fanning it out across the metal floor.

My world shattered apart. I collapsed, my hooves raising to my muzzle as if they could contain my screams. *"Noooo!"*

"Brightwind, you shot a filly!"

My whole body was shaking and couldn't stop. The tears couldn't stop. Oh Goddesses, no!

"Fly steady, soldier."

"Fly steady?" The second pegasus rounded on the first. **"You just *shot a filly!*"**

Hellmare! I'd killed the filly, just as surely as Brightwind had. I'd killed her by trying to help. The image of her vanishing in a spreading cloud of pinkish glitter kept playing over and over in my mind. I couldn't think of anything else!

The first pegasus, Brightwind, turned to her accuser. **"We had our orders, and you will obey them. Now fly steady!"**

"She wasn't running to warn Radar or to hide him! She was just scared!"

I take it back! I cried out silently to Celestia and Luna. *I take it back! I didn't try to help. I didn't let her see me. Please, bring her back. Please! Let me take it back!* But no amount of regret or pleading with the Goddesses would make the sparkling ash spiral upwards and be reborn in a flash of light.

"W-we can't know that, soldier," Brightwind insisted defensively. **"Now either shut up and fly steady or get your tail back to the Raptor and I'll deal with you later!"**

"I didn't sign up for this," the pegasus said, turning away from Brightwind and flying back the way they came.

* * *

The thunder of the harbor guns signaled the arrival of the Raptors. Friendship City had not given up their resident Dashite. The Enclave began a full attack at the sixty-ninth minute mark.

I had crawled over to the ashes of the Arbu filly, gathering them together with my telekinesis. That's as far as I'd gotten when Calamity found me, flying in loaded down with all our weapons.

"Li'lpip! What are ya doing?" he shouted as a lancing blast of crimson magical energy speared through the upper levels of the Pony of Friendship, slicing through homes and catwalks. The pegasus grabbed me, dragging me away as chunks of walkway and scaffolding came raining down.

"I… I couldn't find anything to put her in," I said, looking up into the eyes of my friend, showing him the glowing ball of ash wrapped gingerly in my magic. It was so small. It seemed hardly enough to have been a filly.

Calamity sat me down in the shelter of Sparkle's as another blast from one of the Raptors' magical energy cannons burnt a hole the size of a chariot through the side of the statue, engulfing Warm Smiles Inn. If there were any ponies inside, they were incinerated within seconds by the fuchsia-colored flames.

Calamity looked at the ash I was holding, his bewildered expression shifting to wounded understanding. He looked around and dug an empty Sparkle~Cola bottle out of a trash bin. "Here, Li'lpip. Put her in here."

My world had become that ash. With gentle reverence, I magically funneled the filly into the bottle. It glowed a soft off-pink. I floated out a bottle cap, screwing it on tight.

"Okay, Li'lpip. She's taken care of," Calamity was telling me. "Now Ah need ya back. Ah know it's hard, and Ah know it hurts, but we need ya here an' now." I stared at him, wondering how he could be so close and yet so far away.

"D'ya understand me, Li'lpip?"

All around us, ponies were fleeing in terror, trying to get to the exits. They didn't care that there weren't enough boats. The thundering of the harbor guns was thinning out.

Calamity slapped me. Hard across the face with his forehoof.

I gasped, lifting a hoof to my cheek in surprise.

I could hear screams and nearby explosions.

"Ponies lives are countin' on ya, Li'lpip," Calamity said, drawing my attention to a focus. "Y'all gotta pull yourself together. Hurt tomorrow, help today."

I slowly nodded, coming to my senses like a swimmer fighting her way to the ocean's surface.

Tucking the bottle of ash into my saddlebags, I looked to Calamity. "W-What can I do to help?"

Calamity smiled, looking ready to collapse in relief.

⁂

"They came in with three Raptors," Radar told us as we reached one of the sniper platforms in the crown of the Pony of Friendship. "Harbor guns took out one o' them."

I looked into the sky at the two dark warships hovering over Friendship Island as dozens of pegasi swarmed about the statue. Chief Lantern and two security ponies fired at the attacking Enclave soldiers as quickly as they could find targets, ducking behind low barricades as the pegasi returned fire. Beside me, Calamity swiftly assembled Spitfire's Thunder.

The cannons of the left Raptor flashed, sending magical energy blasts into the statue, tearing through its reinforced copper skin and into the city beyond. The other Raptor floated impassively.

"That second Raptor stopped firing after taking out the last o' the harbor guns," Radar informed me. "We need t' take out that last Raptor!" Shaking his head, he added, "Really wish I knew why they were so hot t' get me."

Radar looked at me apologetically. "I would o' gone out myself, but Freshwater wouldn't let me. Threatened t' shoot me if I tried." He looked up. "I'd go now, but it don't matter anymore."

He was right. The Enclave had gone this far. They weren't planning on leaving survivors.

An Enclave pegasus pulling a war wagon dove towards the ponies spilling out of the statue. With a kick of her hoof, a door beneath the wagon snapped open and bombs began to fall. Helpless ponies below were rent apart, their bodies flung in tatters by detonations of savage energy.

Calamity stood up, taking aim. Spitfire's Thunder tore at the air, the shot piercing the war wagon. The explosion ripped apart the sky.

"Good shot," Radar praised gently.

Calamity was breathing heavily, looking near tears himself. "Not fast enough."

"Ain't none o' this worth me," Radar said.

I followed his gaze down to the blasted ground, bloodied with the shredded bodies of innocent ponies. The crushing grief that had overwhelmed my soul was breaking apart, slowly replaced with a building war cry.

This wasn't right. This was *evil.* And I had to stop it.

"I think yew c'n turn this whole thing 'round if yew can shut down that last Raptor," Radar repeated. "I'd do it myself but…" He looked down. "Not as fit as I used t' be." Looking up again, he added, "And not a word o' that t' Doctor Freshwater, yew hear!"

"We'll do it," I told Radar. Turning to Calamity, "I have a plan."

I stared at the burning wreckage of the docks. The Enclave had bombed the ships. No pony was getting off the island by boat.

The delivery wagon for *Absolutely Everything* was scattered in burning fragments across the water and along the sagging, demolished piers.

I looked to Ditzy Doo in empathetic horror. But the glowing ghoul merely shrugged, writing "It's just a wagon" on her chalkboard.

As the glowing pegasus flew out over the devastation, my eyes caught sight of something crimson and green floating in the water. A pony's forehoof, bloody and ragged.

A memory bubbled to the surface of my brain.

Help me! Ambrosia had rasped. She had been dying inside her armor, pinned by part of the terminal bank, half-sunk in the tainted water that was spraying into the room. Her body already twisted and malformed.

I hadn't been able to reach her. I had barely been quick enough spreading Xenith's goop over the ragged stump of my hindleg before I had bled out. I'd downed every healing potion I had, but the loss of blood had left me so weak and dizzy I couldn't levitate anything heavier than one of the coffee cups. My blood had left a wet crimson river pouring out from beneath the slab that was holding me down, flowing down into the tainted water, making it pink in the light of my PipBuck.

Heeeelp meeee! she had whimpered, her voice filled with torment. *Pleeeeeease! Kill meeeeeee!*

I had wanted to. For the love of merciful Celestia, I had wanted to. But shy of trying to beat her to death with a coffee cup, there had been nothing I could do.

Then a voice in my head had reminded me that wasn't true. There was one thing I could do.

I remembered focusing my magic, lifting up her visor. Her eyes hadn't been in the right places anymore. Only one of them, engorged and strange, had stared out at me, tortured beyond the telling of it.

As I stood near the docks, watching that bobbing, severed hoof, I recalled thinking: *maybe not a sword, but there is enough blood for a dagger.*

The memory broke, leaving me shaken. I tried to dredge up what had happened next, but there was only blackness where the memory should have been.

It took her less than a minute fluttering about the debris and floating crates before our friendly ghoul returned to me, her eyes looking in different directions, a smile on her muzzle and a StealthBuck in her hooves.

I shook myself from my morbid reverie and added the StealthBuck to the other equipment I had acquisitioned. I shuddered. What had happened to me that I could look at a poor pony's dismembered stump and not want to scream? The Equestrian Wasteland had poisoned my soul.

Above us, the hostile Raptor fired a blast at the crown of the Pony of Friendship, engulfing one of the sniper platforms in deadly magic. I pulled Ditzy Doo with me, taking cover against the copper robes of the statue as chunks of burning flesh rained down.

Calamity swooped up next to us, dodging falling debris as he dropped two sets of Enclave armor at my hooves, scavenged from the bodies of pegasi taken out by the snipers.

"Two?" I asked him. "I can't wear one of those." I pointed out dryly. "Horn. No wings."

Ditzy Doo jabbed me with a hoof.

"What?" My eyes widened as I literally put two and two together. "Wait. Ditzy, you can't come with us! We're going into a fight!"

"She's lived two hundred years," Calamity reminded me. "Ah reckon she c'n take care o' herself, li'l miss two-months-outta-the-Stable."

Ditzy Doo leveled a look at me as explosions shook the island. Calamity hefted up Spitfire's Thunder, searching for the war wagon on a bombing run.

"Okay, fine. You're coming," I acquiesced, locking the StealthBuck into my PipLeg and locking everything we weren't taking, including Calamity's battle saddle, in a nearby crate. "Suit up."

Ditzy Doo gave me a one-hooved salute and started dressing, hiding her brilliant, ghoulish body completely inside the black, insectoid armor.

⁂

"This is Raptor Pyrocumulus to Raptor Altostratus. Respond immediately."

As Calamity and Ditzy Doo, disguised as Enclave soldiers, flew us closer to the black maw of the attacking Raptor's hangar, my PipLeg had latched onto a new signal – one which wasn't playing the Enclave's continuous public broadcast – and decrypted it. I found myself listening to the pegasi's inter-warship military frequency.

"This is Commander Thundersheer of the Raptor Pyrocumulus to Commander Ice Break of the Raptor Altostratus. Why have you stopped firing?" the authoritative voice of the commanding mare asked, clearly attempting to communicate with the unresponsive second Raptor. **"You are required to respond."**

Calamity landed on the Raptor's lower flight deck, dropping my invisible self and the sacks I was carrying onto the black metal floor lined with small, pulsing guide lights. He trotted up to the hangar door, looking over access terminal. I moved up next to him, Ditzy Doo watching our flank, as he attempted to hack into it. As expected, the access terminal had a cloud interface. I could offer him advice, but once again I was denied the chance to do this myself.

"Commander Thundersheer, this is Commander Ice Break. The enemy is defenseless. The battle has been won. Raptor Altostratus is standing down," a second pegasus mare replied in a dignified, reserved voice. **"A wing is standing by to retrieve the prisoner as soon as Raptor Pyrocumulus disengages."**

Ditzy Doo gave a little dance in her armor. Apparently, she was picking up the transmission too. The rebellion of the second Raptor filled her heart with delight.

"Almost got it," Calamity grunted. I turned back to the terminal, scanning the lines of code he had brought up. Somewhere in that matrix was the password.

"Commander Ice Break, those are not your orders! Resume firing."

"With all due respect, Commander Thundersheer: no."

After two failed tries, we located the correct password. Pragmatism.

The heavy blast doors sealing the hangar slid open. Inside, the high ceiling was laced with humming lights identical to those I grew up with in Stable Two, but more sparsely placed, leaving the hangar feeling dark and cold. Large, heavily armored windows along the roof let in the grey twilight of late evening between mounted magical energy turrets. I imagined that the hangar would have been bright and almost pleasant if those windows were letting in the pure sunlight of mid-day above the cloud curtain.

Enclave technicians and internal soldiers wearing the light combat version of Enclave armor moved above busily. Rows of war wagons lined the edges of the hangar. Red fire boxes were mounted at intervals along the walls. Racks of bombs stood between the observation windows at the far back. On the other side, Enclave officers split their attention between watching the hangar and monitoring the war chatter.

"Dammit, Ice Break! Operation Cauterize is in effect. This is straight from the Enclave High Council," the mare commanding the Raptor we had boarded reminded her peer. **"You have your orders. Now lock your targets and resume firing or you and your entire crew will be guilty of Disaffection!"**

Ditzy Doo and Calamity moved off together, moving like they had a purpose, like they belonged. So long as they didn't do anything suspicious, they should be ignored.

Meanwhile, I galloped silently towards the first war wagon. I only had one standard StealthBuck's worth of time to do this, and I had already spent half of that just getting up here and inside.

"Raptor Pyrocumulus, the ponies of Raptor Altostratus regret to inform you that we will not slaughter helpless ground ponies, no matter what our orders say."

I reached the first wagon and bucked the switch that opened its bomb door. Floating two of the homemade bombs out of the first sack, I wedged them up next to the war wagon's payload.

The bombs had been built using the schematics for the "bottle cap mine" that Ditzy Doo had given me (it felt like ages ago). But instead of cherry bombs and bottle caps, these lunch boxes carried explosive munitions used in the (now destroyed) smaller-caliber harbor guns. Mayor Black Seas had donated the supplies. Ditzy Doo had helped me make them. A lot of them.

"Ffft. Bwah?" Commander Thundersheer sputtered in disbelief as I moved to the next war wagon. **"By our great leaders, this is mutiny, Ice Break! Think about what you're doing. They'll have your crew for treason."**

There was no response from Commander Ice Break or the other Raptor. I planted two more bombs and moved to a third war wagon.

Shadows played across the hangar. I looked up, watching through the ceiling windows as the huge magical energy cannons mounted on the Raptor's top deck swiveled to the left. I could hear the belly-mounted cannons still firing on Friendship City.

"Raptor Altostratus this is Raptor Pyrocumulus!" the commander barked. **"You will lock your targets and resume firing or we will fire on you!"**

Finishing with the third wagon, I dashed to the first of the bomb racks, setting bombs as quickly as I could. I spared a glance towards Calamity and Ditzy Doo. They had been waylaid by an Enclave officer who was demanding something of our speechless ghoul.

"She can't talk," Calamity was saying, prevaricating swiftly, "Battle wound t' the throat." Beside him, Ditzy Doo nodded, eagerly backing Calamity's story. "Look, Ah'm her C.O., so anything ya need t' ask her, ya c'n ask me."

The Enclave officer, a youthful grey buck with a black mane and a quill for a cutie mark, looked between my two disguised friends, insisting, "We don't have any soldiers on Raptor Pyrocumulus with that kind of injury." He stared at Calamity suspiciously. "And I don't recognize that accent. Where did you say you were from again?"

Everypony in the hangar froze, turning their gazes upwards, as Raptor Pyrocumulus opened fire on her sister.

I scrambled to place my makeshift explosives on the second and third bomb racks. I was getting close to where the officer was interrogating my pegasus friends.

Calamity flapped his wings in irritation. "Look…" he grumbled, "We're from the Altostratus. Command over there's gone disloyal. We got out while we could…"

"Well, that is to be commended," the buck told him, wrenching his eyes from the windows above. "But under the circumstances, I'm afraid I'm going to have to place you both in the brig until the battle is over." The young officer revolved in place, looking for the closest soldiers. "Your loyalty will be determined by a tribunal once we are cloudside again."

"Aw hell," Calamity hissed as he stepped back, striking down the officer with a sting of his armored tail. Ditzy Doo back-trotted, her body language betraying shock.

"Time t' go!" Calamity shouted as bolts of colored light whizzed throughout the hangar, the soldiers and defense turrets reacting swiftly. I floated the signal detonator out next to me, dropping the sack of lunchbox explosives at the base of the last bomb rack, and galloped.

Beams of magical energy struck at Ditzy Doo and Calamity, peeling away at their protective magically-powered armor. One of the shots disintegrated a plate of Ditzy's armor, the sickly yellow-green light of her irradiated ghoul body shining out of the hole in the black carapace.

I kicked the StealthBuck out of my PipLeg, giving the turrets and soldiers another target.

Thunder rumbled through the hangar from outside as one of the Pyrocumulus' cannons struck something vital in the Altostratus.

Calamity and Ditzy Doo shot out of the hangar, several pegasi in hot pursuit.

I felt the first scorching blast lance off my Canterlot police armor, sizzling it, as I reached the landing platform. I wrapped myself in my magic, making myself weightless, and jumped.

Beneath us, the canted form of Raptor Altostratus was bellowing smoke, its left-side thundercloud dispersed, gaping holes glowing in its framework as it dropped slowly out of the sky. One of the Pyrocumulus' belly cannons swiveled and fired on the ruined warship as it crashed into Friendship Bridge, tearing apart catastrophically.

I triggered the detonator. Behind me, light and heat erupted from the hangar of the Pyrocumulus, a draconic roar building with the cascade of explosions. A blast of fire buffeted me, sending me spinning through the sky, my magic imploding as the bomb racks went up like a volcanic armageddon, magical fire rending the Enclave warship in half.

This time, it was Ditzy Doo who caught me. Her Enclave armor was perforated, her helmet gone. Glowing ichor seeped out of numerous painful wounds. But she was grinning, one of her eyes staring at me as she gave a squeaky victory cheer.

My heart lifted at her jubilation. But then sank again as I looked out at the burning Pony of Friendship, the smoke of an incinerated city and murdered ponies blackly bellowing out of glowing wounds carved by destructive magical energy.

⁂

We almost made it into Fetlock before the Enclave caught us.

It was the dead of night. Thunderclouds above rumbled angrily, still threatening a terrible storm.

We had fled Friendship Island (after magically snatching up the crate with all our belongings), drawing off as many of the remaining Enclave soldiers as we could. Most of them had abandoned the fight when all of their warships had fallen, but a few had been determined enough to continue "mop up", and were engaged by the remaining security ponies.

Thanks to our help, a little over a quarter of Friendship City's population still survived. Radar and Chief Lantern were not amongst the living. Both were killed when the Pyrocumulus took out their sniper platform. Calamity had become withdrawn and laconic since the news.

The survivors were still trapped on the island. The Pyrocumulus had destroyed the docks and boats. The crash of the Altostratus had wiped out a section of the bridge. Once we got back to Stable Twenty-Nine, we intended to enlist the aid of the Applejack's Rangers. I was certain that the needs of nearly two hundred suffering ponies would draw Velvet Remedy out of her shell.

But Ditzy Doo was wounded. More than she let on. And as we drew close to the edge of Manehattan, she had begun flagging. So we landed in the ruins of a building which, based on the plate-and-silverware design still visible on the badly deteriorated and half-buried sign, had once been a diner. (Or, from the horseshoe motif running along the top of its one standing wall, possibly a shoe shop.)

When the ruins had turned up empty, Calamity had taken Spitfire's Thunder and had flown into the rubble of the apartment building next door, searching for food, RadAway and anything else he could find. This left me sitting on the edge of the ruins, staring across the street. Ditzy Doo had discarded the ruined Enclave armor and was splashing playfully in a glowing puddle of radioactive waste spilled from the back of a wagon bearing the M.A.S. logo.

I couldn't help by smile at her antics as the glowing ghoul rolled in the waste, the radiation healing her wounds. This wasn't helping her condition, but now that the doctors of Friendship City had taught her how to relieve herself of the build up quickly, Ditzy Doo was considerably less worried.

Catching my eye, she shook herself off, flinging glowing goop all over the wagon and the rubble around her, then began to trot back to me, closing her eyes and concentrating as she did so. Her body pulsed with a flash of radiation that drove her face-planting into the broken asphalt of the street. She stood back up, her eyes reeling in different directions, then giggled at her own clumsiness.

As she reached me, she set down her chalkboard, scribbling out, *"Absolutely Everything* does not have boats. Must fix."

"Don't worry," I assured her. "We'll get those ponies to safety."

Ditzy Doo nodded happily and kicked her chalkboard up, dipping her head and expertly catching the neck loop so that it hung again against her fleshy breast.

"Do not move," the armor-augmented voice cut through the darkness. I immediately cursed myself, bringing up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle up. **"We have you surrounded."**

There were red lights all over my compass.

I looked towards the crate that still held most of my weapons. I had retrieved Little Macintosh, but the zebra rifle and sniper rifle were still inside. I did a quick mental calculation of how many armor-piercing bullets I had left for my favorite gun, how long it would take to reload, and the chances they would kill my now-unarmored ghoul companion before I could take them down.

With a heavy sigh, I responded. "We surrender."

* * *

Ditzy Doo poked at the blue field of our magical energy cage with her hoof, making an "ow" sound. (Something she didn't need a tongue for.) I stared through the field at the Enclave soldiers milling about outside. A technician pegasus sat next to the terminal which controlled the energy cages – there were others, but ours was the only one occupied. I noted glumly that it had a cloud interface. Next to it was an Enclave crate where Little Macintosh was imprisoned.

My PipBuck was clicking steadily. Being locked in here with Ditzy Doo was bathing me in radiation. I noticed gloomily that the scrapes and bruises I had acquired in Friendship City were all fading away, and that my stomach was beginning to churn unpleasantly, threatening to divest me of my precious lunch.

Poke. "ow." Poke. "ow."

"These ponies aren't from the attack on Friendship City," I observed with a whisper, watching an Enclave officer toss her emptied bottle of Sunrise Sarsaparilla into a trash bin that was beginning to overflow. I had glimpsed an Enclave antenna array as they marched us to the cages.

"They've been camped here for a while now." I looked to Ditzy Doo. "Any guesses as to what they're up to?"

Ditzy Doo looked to me and shook her head, the last wisps of her mane flapping about. Then she turned back to the blue, cracking wall in front of her. Poke. "ow."

A mustard-coated pegasus in the light Enclave combat armor (identical, I noted, to the armor I had first seen Rainbow Dash showing off to her friends) stopped his walking patrol to lift his visor and glare at Ditzy Doo. "Would ya cut that out?" he growled. "Y'all are givin' me a headache."

Poke. "Ow!"

"Hey," he barked to me. "Can't ya make yer little monster knock it off?"

"Nope," I replied, as I caught movement in the corner of my eye. Gazing out, I saw Calamity moving up on a high ridge of rubble. Our cavalry had arrived.

I shifted away and lowered my head, trying to look forlorn and pathetic, burying my face in my hooves to allow myself to serendipitously watch Calamity without alerting any of the ponies keeping an eye on us.

Calamity shifted Spitfire's Thunder into position, peering down the scope at the pegasi all around us. I waited, my nerves alive with anticipation.

Calamity stared at the other pegasi. And did not fire.

"Calamity?" I whispered to myself.

Slowly, Calamity pulled back, sliding Spitfire's Thunder away, and disappeared.

Ditzy Doo dropped her chalkboard next to me: "He isn't going to rescue us?"

Calamity? I thought, feeling apprehensive and a little hurt. *What are you doing?*

* * *

Two pegasi in fearsome onyx armor marched Calamity into the camp at the tips of their viciously sharp tails. The rust-colored Dashite walked in front of them, wings held high.

Oh dammit, Calamity!

"Up you go," one of the pegasi ordered as the technician lowered the field around one of the magical energy cages. She prodded Calamity up onto the platform. He cantered around to stare at her as the blue field washed up between them.

I moved as close to him as our cage would allow. The shielded cage was beginning to feel uncomfortably warm. "Calamity," I hissed. "What…?"

Calamity just looked at me sadly. "Sorry, Li'lpip. Ah… Ah jus' couldn't."

"Even after what they just did? Are you serious?"

Calamity shifted uncomfortably and nodded, offering no explanation. But an explanation was forthcoming.

"Well, look who we 'ave here!" It was the pegasus buck who had growled at Ditzy Doo. He was trotting up, looking like a colt who had just gotten his cutie mark. "If it ain't my little brony!"

His little what now?

"Hello, Pride," Calamity said sourly. "Ah see they're lettin' just anypony inta the Enclave these days."

"Hey," the mustard-coated pony hissed. "Ah ain't the traitor here."

"No," Calamity jabbed. "Y'all just washed out. Three times, no less."

"You know him?" I asked.

Pride turned to me with a grin, "Oh, are y'all friends?" He looked from Calamity to us and back in exaggerated astonishment. "Well, what d'ya know. Li'l Calamity actually managed t' make some friends." He rolled his eyes, adding, "A munchkin mare an' a monster."

Pride smirked at us. "Y'all should really chose a better friend," the Enclave buck said nastily. "Calamity here's a flyin' disaster."

Leaning close to me just beyond the blue field, Pride nickered like he was about to tell me a secret. I stood up, glaring through the energy barrier at him. "Ya know why father named him Calamity?" the buck asked far too loudly.

Father? Pride was Calamity's brother? No wonder he wouldn't shoot!

I suddenly flashed back to the first argument Velvet Remedy had with us about eating meat.

Oh, we c'n eat meat all right. Jus' don't much like to. Ain't really good for our diet, Calamity had asserted. *Muh brothers used t' challenge me t' hotdog eatin' contests. Which mostly meant them shoving the disgustin' things down muh throat.*

Calamity's brother grinned maliciously, "Cuz he killed our mother comin' out."

I dropped back on my haunches, the cruelty of Pride's claim knocking the wind from me. The little pony in my head cried at the pain such vicious words must be causing my best friend.

But Calamity only looked bored. "That again?" he drawled, unimpressed. "Ya ain't seen me fer six years, an' in all that time, ya ain't come up with anythin' new?" The orange-maned pegasus shook his head. "Back when Ah was a blank-flank colt an' y'all would tell me that, Ah'd bawl fer hours. But case ya ain't noticed, that was a long time ago, an' Ah ain't a li'l foal no more."

Pride sneered. "Really? Strange. Ah don't see no cutie mark on ya, baby brother."

Calamity rolled his eyes. "An' ya know why," he spat.

The mustard-coated Enclave pony laughed, stomping a hoof on the ground. "That Ah do!" He peered into Calamity's cage at his little brother. "And Ah should be thankin' ya. Brandin' that mark off yer flanks was muh rite o' passage inta the Enclave."

I reeled. Calamity's *own brother* had branded his cutie mark off?!

"Then again, y'all should be thankin' me," Pride snarked. "Who wants a picture of a hammer on their flank anyway?"

He swiveled back to Calamity, "Ow, that's gotta sting, knowin' ya abandoned yer own kind, became a filthy traitor, when all ya had t' do was wait a few more years?"

"Muh loyalty was, and has always been, t' the ponies o' Equestria," Calamity glared back. "Ain't muh fault the Enclave's allegiance is only t' itself. If they were what they pretended t' be, they'd a been down here with me."

"Still spoutin' them horseapple, li'l brother?" Pride jabbed. "We'll, case y'all missed it, we're here now."

"So, Pride," Calamity asked tiredly, "What's this really all about? Cuz it ain't the Grand Pegasus Enclave swoopin' t' the rescue. Ah ain't seen a single civilian. This is a military operation, through an' through."

Pride nickered. "Haven't y'all been listenin' t' the radio? There's a bastard pony named Red Eye who's messin' with shit that ain't his t' mess with."

"Ya mean the Sing…" Calamity quickly corrected himself, "Sustainable Pegasus Project?"

"Ayep. Somethin' he did alerted the higher-ups an' they started diggin' into all the shit he's been doin' with one o' our towers. None too bright, that Red Eye. Left all sorts o' clues as t' what he's been dippin' his hooves in."

I frowned. Careless wasn't Red Eye's nature. On the other hoof, if the Enclave could override DJ Pon3's signal from the M.A.S.E.B.S., they could very possibly be able to access things Red Eye reasonably expected to be secure.

Or Red Eye could be setting them up somehow. From what I saw in Friendship City, the Enclave was sowing the seeds of their own destruction just being here.

And that was before taking into account what my friends and I were going to do to them.

"An' what's that gotta do with blastin' the royal city off the side of the mountain?"

Calamity questioned. "Why don't y'all jus' fly over and kill 'im? What's Operation Cauterize?"

Pride pulled up short. "Where'd ya hear that?"

"Ah have muh sources," Calamity said cryptically, holding a hoof to his breast.

Pride glared at my friend for a good spell before finally saying, "Don't do the Enclave no good t' jus' kill the bastard. Even if we take 'im down, somepony else might step inta his hoofprints and try t' finish what he started."

So, what, they had to take out Red Eye *and* Stern?

"T' protect the Enclave an' the pegasi race, we gotta take out Red Eye, those he may have told an' anypony else who might know 'bout the Sustainable Pegasus Project," Pride stated firmly. "An' get rid o' the last earth-side hubs o' the damned Ministry o' Awesome so's nopony else c'n ever stumble 'cross what Red Eye did."

Goddesses. That's why they were after Radar. He'd been in the MAw. There would be Enclave troops hunting us down for the same reason.

The gears in my mind started churning. Homage was a target too. Who else? The little pony in my head started piecing together a picture that filled me with dread. The Enclave had tried to wipe Friendship City off the map. *Tends not to leave loose ends,* the voice I now recognized as Commander Thundersheer had said. He didn't want to just murder Radar; he might have told other members of the science team. And they might have told friends or family. In Thundersheer's mind, the whole city was "infected" and they all had to perish.

How many degrees of separation before the Enclave wouldn't consider somepony a threat? How far were they planning to go?

"Y'all are talkin' 'bout mass murder," Calamity breathed. "Ain't no way the Enclave thinks it c'n be Equestria's savior after this!" His eyes narrowed, his gaze sharper than a dagger. "But then, they don't ever plan on rejoinin' Equestria, do they?"

Pride gave Calamity a pitying look.

"So, what's the plan then?" Calamity stomped. "The civilians gotta see somethin's up. The Enclave plannin' t' write this off as a big scoutin' mission? 'Oh we thought that maybe it was time fer us t' descend, but after a prolonged exploration, we realized that jus' ain't feasible. Best we wait 'nother two hundred years'?"

"Somethin' like that," Pride said dismissively.

⁂

We sat in our magical cages in silence as dawn began to color the horizon. I was supremely tired, but none of us actually felt like sleeping. Calamity had apologized again, several times in fact, until I had nearly shouted at him that it was okay.

I'd spent the last two hours contemplating how I could levitate the weapons I could get my magic on and use them to wipe out the camp. Right now, while most of it was asleep, I figured I had a good chance of pulling it off.

But then, we'd still be stuck in these cages.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, trembling slightly. My E.F.S. was warning me that my radiation exposure had reached critical levels. I had to try something, but it would have to be something that worked. I wouldn't survive in here long enough to get another chance.

Ditzy Doo was huddled on the far corner of the cage, keeping away from me as best she could. But in this small a space, it really didn't matter.

Calamity was laying down in his cage, looking morose.

"I'm sure Pride was wrong," I told my friend through the shields between us. "About your father, I mean. He wouldn't have named you after the death of your mother."

Calamity's muzzle gave me a wry smile. "Ah could never bring muhself t' ask. But, knowin' muh father, he prob'ly did."

Luna's mercy. That was… horrible. "I… I'm sorry, Calamity, but I kinda hate your father right now."

Calamity smiled, sitting up. "That's okay, Li'lpip. He'd be happy t' hear it." I winced. "Everypony hates muh father. That's his job. Most loathed bastard in all the Enclave."

"Your father is Enclave too?" I breathed, my mind suddenly conjuring images of Calamity's father as a member of the Enclave High Council. Possibly even the stallion behind Operation Cauterize. Goddesses… don't put Calamity through that. It's not fair!

"Ayep," Calamity said, a grim little smile playing over his face. "Drill Sergeant at Neighvarro."

He stood up, raising his wings and dropping his voice mockingly, "A HAMMER? Yer cutie mark is a fuckin' HAMMER? That had BETTER be to HAMMER down yer enemies, boy! Or yer the SORRIEST EXCUSE fer a SON that Ah EVER did see!"

Wow.

Calamity sat back down, chuckling a little despite himself. "Ayep. That's muh dad." He shook his mane, looking at me. "Any surprise all four o' his bucks ended up in the Enclave?"

Suddenly, my mother felt like a blessing.

"So…" I said, trying to strike up conversation while I searched for a solution to our predicament. "Your cutie mark was a hammer?"

Calamity looked up. "Ayep. An' a screwdriver."

"Your cutie mark was tools?" It was not what I had expected. I would have imagined my friend with crosshairs on his flank. Or a bullseye. Although that would hardly be the best thing to be sporting on your flank in the Equestrian Wasteland.

Still, this was Calamity. The pony who delighted in fixing up the *Sky Bandit* and making it fly again. Who put on armor and a pony rack. Who repaired everything from firearms to dresses. I thought of him as a sharpshooter; but thinking about it, I realized that every weapon he used aside from Spitfire's Thunder was a weapon he had modified or built himself. He'd even jury-rigged his Enclave armor to allow him to shoot it without wearing the helmet.

Ditzy Doo trotted up, pressing her chalkboard against the shield, making it crackle.

Calamity peered, reading. "Story?" He looked at me, baffled.

Cocking my head at Ditzy Doo, I guessed, "I think she wants to hear your cutie mark story." With a smile, I added, "I think I do too."

"Cutie marks don't matter," Calamity told us drearily.

"Come on," I encouraged, clopping my hooves on the floor of the cage. "Story! Story!" Ditzy Doo joined in.

Calamity rolled his eyes and shot me a look. "Fine. But y'all gotta share yers too." He tipped his desperado hat, thinking.

* * *

“When Ah was a li’l colt,” Calamity began, “All Ah wanted t’ do was make muh father proud o’ me. Which was nearly impossible, even fer muh big brothers. Ah was never gonna be as big or strong as ’em, so Ah practiced shootin’. First year Ah tried the Young Sharpshooter’s Competition, Ah came in third.

“Father was so disappointed.”

I winced.

“I tried t’ tell ’im that Ah tried muh best, but he told me that meant muh best was pathetic. I said it wasn’t muh fault. That the old gun he’d given me was all weighted funny an’ hard t’ aim. He told me that Ah shoulda fixed it better then.”

Calamity shook his head, digging a hoof at the cell floor. “So’s that’s what Ah did. Ah spent all year tinkerin’ with that gun. Fixin’ the sights, buildin’ a custom muzzle grip, addin’ weight t’ the shoulder brace so it was more balanced.

“Next year, Ah placed first.”

Calamity looked up at me, tears in his eyes. “Th-that was the first time muh father ever smiled at me. First t-time he ever told me Ah’d done good.”

He stared into the morning sky. The rising sun was painting the clouds with glorious oranges and pinks and golds. “When Ah got home an’ took off muh competitors bardin’, there they were. A hammer an’ a screwdriver. Best day o’ muh life.”

He looked down, reaching back a hoof to ruffle his mane. “’Till Ah met ya an’ Velvet, o’ course.”

* * *

“I was dead last amongst my peers to get my cutie mark,” I told them. “All the other colts and fillies who had been in my class had gotten their cutie marks a full two years before, and the Overmare wanted to put me to work.”

I explained, “Normally, in Stable Two, we were assigned the jobs we would have for the rest of our lives based on our cutie marks. Without mine, the Overmare couldn’t assign me. So she drew on some ancient bylaw created by Stable Two’s first Overmare which allowed her to have me temporarily apprentice under a variety of positions until something sparked my cutie mark to appear. Mostly, she had me try out a number of administrative and technical apprenticeships, since those were the areas most unicorns were assigned to anyway.”

I looked down at the PipBuck grossly infused into the flesh of my leg. “We were supposed to get our PipBucks after we got our cutie marks and our job assignment.”

Biting my lower lip, I thought back. “One day, while I was apprenticing with the head PipBuck Technician, a worried couple slipped into the PipBuck Technician’s stall. Their son had gone missing. He had run off during his Cutie Mark Party. Somehow, he’d gotten himself lost in the Stable and they couldn’t find him.”

Calamity was staring at me, a little bewildered. He remembered how small and enclosed the Stables were compared to the outside world.

"One of the most overlooked capabilities of a PipBuck is that it can track tagged objects. Mostly, this is used for the automapper. My PipBuck came loaded with a whole slew of preset location tags. I'm still getting surprised by occasional 'you are here' messages on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle." I smiled a little, remembering how astonished I was that my PipBuck knew the name of Sweet Apple Acres. "Every PipBuck has a tag, allowing anypony with that tag code and another PipBuck to locate them."

"My mentor was… asleep. Which was not uncommon for him. So I hacked into his terminal and downloaded the tag code for the colt's new PipBuck into one of the ones I had been working on. I took the tools that allowed me to unlock it and put the PipBuck on, bringing up an Eyes-Forward Sparkle for the first time. Keying the E.F.S. compass to the colt's tag, I slipped through the Stable until I found him.

"The colt had managed to get himself locked in the maintenance shed for the Apple Orchard. It was after hours, and nopony had been around to hear his banging and yelling. I didn't want to get the colt in trouble, so instead of fetching one of the gardener ponies, I picked the lock and got him out myself."

I gave a weak grin. "Of course, he went and told everypony how I had 'rescued' him, and so I got in trouble for appropriating the PipBuck and picking the lock. But at least my mentor covered for me about the hacking. And the Overmare wasn't going to press the issue, seeing as my new cutie mark dictated that I would be with him for a good long while."

Smiling softly at the memory, I concluded, "It was the first time I had ever felt I'd done something useful. Something really… good."

* * *

I don't think either of us had been expecting Ditzy Doo to join in the storytelling – hell, we couldn't even tell what the ghoul's cutie mark had been – so both Calamity and I were surprised when the glowing pegasus dropped her chalkboard at my hooves and prodded me to read. (And then prodded me harder, reminding me to read aloud so Calamity could hear.)

It took a great many pauses while Ditzy Doo wiped the chalkboard clean and wrote a few more words before her simple story was told:

"Uncle owned a moving wagon company.

"Uncle let me help. He didn't let me do too much carrying. Said I was clumsy. But he let me ride around on the wagon and called me his little mascot.

"I liked it. It was fun to help ponies move into a new home. I liked seeing them happy. Especially families.

"Super especially when they had fillies or colts my age.

"Once, there was a family who was sad about moving. They had a little filly and a littler colt, but they were scared of me because my eyes are different. So I made funny faces and got them to laugh at me. Then they were happy.

"Then I took them back to where uncle kept all the packing supplies, and I showed them the most fun thing in the entire world: bubble wrap.

"They loved popping all the bubbles, especially little Pokey. We had fun all day long.

"Uncle told me that was when I got my cutie mark. But I was having too much fun to notice.”

* * *

I had almost come up with a plan when Pride snuck past our cages and to the terminal. Poking it with a hoof, he brought down the walls of magical energy.

Calamity jumped up, leaping off the cage platform. “What the hey?”

“Just go,” Pride hissed.

I whispered to Calamity, pointing at the Enclave crate that Little Macintosh was locked away in.

“Open that,” Calamity said, pointing his hoof, “And we will.”

Pride nashed his teeth in exasperation and went to work on the crate.

“So…” Calamity said as the crate hissed open. I floated out Little Macintosh and the few other items they had taken from Ditzy Doo and me. “…we escaped?”

“Somethin’ like that. Ah don’t know. But y’all gotta get.” Pride looked around nervously. “Listen, word just came down. Operation Cauterize has been extended t’ all Dashites. Next time Ah see ya, Ah’ll be shootin’ ya. Understand?”

Calamity nodded. “Gee, Ah ’ave the sudden, unnatural urge t’ hug ya, big brony.”

Ditzy Doo moved up, holding her chalkboard in her teeth with two words written across it. “New Appleloosa?”

Pride gave us an ugly look. “Red Eye’s favorite tradin’ town? The one that gave ’im the bomb he set off, assassinatin’ a member o’ the High Council? Enclave dispatched a full regiment there at first light.”

Ditzy Doo stumbled back at the news, the chalkboard dropping from her open muzzle.

“Monster,” Pride said darkly, “Ah’d be surprised if there’s even a crater left by now.”

Ditzy’s eyes were wide, her pupils huge and centered dead ahead, seeing something beyond Pride, a strangled squeak coming from her throat. She didn’t need to speak for me to know the one thing on her mind: Silver Bell!

I heard the little lavender filly’s voice from two days before, crying out: *Mommy!*

Ditzy Doo broke into flight, headed for New Appleloosa. Calamity scooped me up, giving chase, diverting only far enough for me to telekinetically scoop of Spitfire’s Thunder from the rubble where he’d left it.

* * *

Four Raptors were positioning themselves over New Appleloosa, squads of black-armored pegasi flying about the sky between them. The town was still standing, but we could see Enclave soldiers swooping to strike down ponies who were trying to flee the walls.

Ditzy Doo pulled up, hovering in the air, a look of dismay etched on her face.

Calamity bristled, his eyes narrowing in anger as a pegasus dove at a running mare, opening up with a rapid-fire burst of light that turned the fleeing pony to glowing blue dust.

“Dammit, Li’lpip! We gotta stop this!” He was near the breaking point. I could hear it in his voice.

Before we could react, Ditzy Doo zoomed forward again, flying right into the heart of the Enclave forces. The pegasi whipped about as the glowing one shot past them. They started chasing her, but quickly stopped shooting after their first blasts missed and hit one of the Raptors.

Calamity set me down and started off after her, but I grabbed him by the tail with my teeth. "Whoa! That's suicide," I knew we were about to lose Ditzy Doo, and probably Xenith and Silver Bell. I was damned if I was going to lose Calamity too. "We need a plan!"

Ditzy Doo had stopped in the center of the Enclave forces. They had her surrounded, but they couldn't shoot without risking hitting their own. Several armored pegasi moved in, their tails curling to strike as soon as they got within range.

PFWOOSH!

The burst of light and radiation from the glowing pegasus sent the encroaching Enclave pegasi reeling as Ditzy Doo shot almost straight up into the air, beating her nearly featherless wings as fast and hard as she could.

The Enclave pegasi gave chase. They started to fire again, but Ditzy Doo repeatedly blasted out radiation, each time blinding her pursuers as it shot her up higher.

Two of the Raptors swiveled their topside cannons around, scorching the air with magical death. But the huge weapons were too inaccurate to hit their quickly ascending target. After half a dozen missed shots, they left the escaping ghoul to the black-armored soldiers chasing her.

The glow of Ditzy Doo illuminated a patch of the dark storm clouds as she disappeared into them. Then the glow faded and she was gone.

The ponies following her stopped, hovering in the air. Several began to turn back.

Inside, I knew that she would any moment break through the top of the cloud curtain and see true sunlight for the first time in probably two hundred years. The little pony in my head shed a tear.

Then reality snapped back. Ditzy Doo had distracted the Enclave. She'd given us a window. And we were missing it!

"Okay," I said quickly to Calamity as I slipped the MG StealthBuck II into my malformed PipLeg. "Here's the plan…"

"Whoa," Calamity said, looking up.

I turned, following his gaze, as a spot of golden-green light dropped out of the clouds. I knew what it was, but I still lifted my binoculars to be sure. The first drops of the promised storm began to fall.

Ditzy Doo had broken back through the cloud curtain, shooting past the top tier of hovering Enclave soldiers before they could react.

The ones who had started back down turned and sped in to catch her.

PFWOOSH! The pulse of radioactive light sent the black-armored pegasi spinning out of control as she shot ahead like a rocket.

The other pegasi were reacting now, chasing after her, firing beams of multi-colored light. Most missed. I gasped as some did not.

PFWOOSH! Ditzy Doo jolted ahead, moving even faster. She was aiming right for the center space between the Enclave's Raptors.

The Raptors were in position now. Their belly cannons were taking aim at New Appleloosa below, preparing to cleanse the town off the face of Equestria.

My plan was forgotten as quickly as I had formed it. All I could do was watch.

PFWOOSH!

Ditzy was beyond the reach of her pursuers now. But not, it appeared, beyond the reach of their weapons. One of the Enclave ponies fired twin missiles at the ghoul pegasus as she streaked by, seeming nothing more than a glowing blur. The missiles spun, magically locking onto her. They spiraled around each other leaving a double-helix of smoke in their wake, as they chased her.

PFWOOSH!

The missiles were undeterred and gaining speed, closing the distance as Ditzy Doo beat her wings, arrowing down at the Enclave about to destroy her town and kill her daughter. She was moving so fast the odd air of the Equestrian Wasteland seemed to be warping about her. Her body was glowing brighter and brighter as she focused, building up for another burst. The sickly light pouring from her body was rippling in the air, sheering off of her in washes of unearthly, diseased colors.

The missiles seemed to reach her at the same time she reached the Raptors.

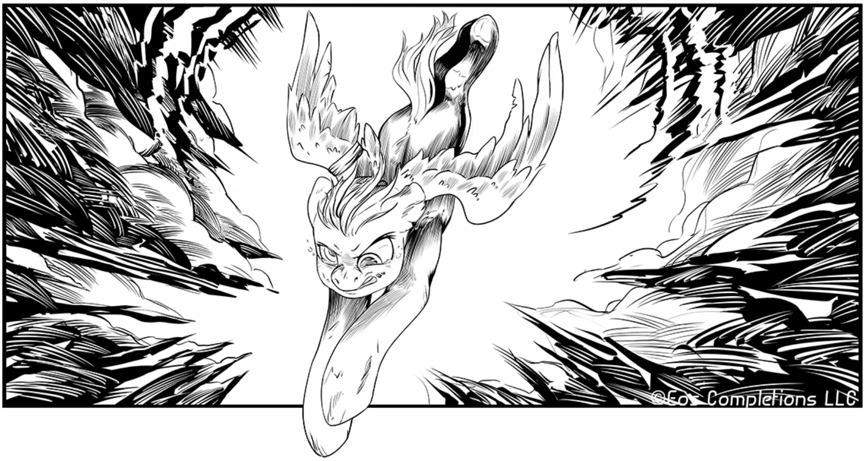
Ditzy Doo exploded.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Quest Perk added: Touched by Taint (3) – Exposure to Taint has further altered your physiology. You are 20% faster and stronger whenever you're basking in the warm glow of radiation. Your Action Points regenerate faster and faster the higher your level of radiation sickness becomes. Your natural lifespan has increased dramatically.

Chapter Forty

Sonic Rad-Boom



"If you're feeling lonely and you're still searching for your true friends, just look up in the sky. Who knows, maybe you… are all looking at the same rainbow."

Loss.

The war had come with thunder and death. And all of the Equestrian Wasteland seemed in mourning. We were deep in our darkest hour, just praying for a ray of light.

We had all suffered loss.

My friends and I had lost one of our own, SteelHooves. He had finally found rest, finally been reunited with his beloved Applejack and their child in whatever life lies beyond this. But all I felt was the gaping wound of his absence. An abscess in the core of our party, aching and hollow, where SteelHooves should have been. The spectre of his death hung over everything, casting all our individual losses into even deeper shadow. Making us all seem more vulnerable and fragile.

I was struggling with a loss of my very self. I was not who I was anymore. Not Littlepip. I was an alien in my own body, a body warped into something entirely non-pony by taint. And I was a stranger in my own mind, not knowing the truth of the things I had done. Velvet's words had cut cruelly, not because she was cruel but because she was right. The balefire bomb had been an atrocity. And yet, as Velvet Remedy had assured me, it had been the necessary thing to do. Without my memories, I didn't know if I had simply never thought of the consequences… or if I had and went ahead anyway.

SteelHooves had paid the price. He had lost his life because of what I had done.

I knew I would never watch those memories. Well, maybe the eighth memory orb – my soul needed Homage's every healing touch – but not the others. I didn't want to know how much I had realized. If I had committed a holocaust, I couldn't bear it. It would be the final, fatal separation from self.

Velvet Remedy was suffering a loss of faith. Velvet was hurting more deeply than the rest of us. The foundation of all that she was had been shattered. The wasteland was more cold and cruel and brutal than any pony should have to bear – too much for a pony whose soul was one filled with kindness and caring for others, whose core desire was to help, to heal and to make things better. To her, it didn't matter if the hurting creature was a pony, a zebra or a monster. Friend, stranger or enemy were all worthy of the same compassion in Velvet Remedy's eyes. I remembered her considering a hellhound a patient and easing the pain of a dying alicorn. Velvet Remedy had weathered all the Equestrian Wasteland had thrown at her, sometimes weakening but never failing in her belief that helping others was the right course of action. And she had done so, fighting both the despair and ugliness of the wasteland and her own inner demons by clinging to her personal religion of Fluttershy. The kindness of the Mare of Peace had been her anchor and her bulwark.

Now, the memories of SteelHooves had revealed the truth to Velvet Remedy, and that bulwark was shattered. And she was drowning.

Calamity was fighting against a loss of all he held dear, and he felt he was losing that battle. Already, one of his friends was dead, and he could see those he held most dear, including the mare he loved, slipping away into their own darkness.

And that horror was playing out against the backdrop of the end of his world. After meeting one of Calamity's brothers (and seeing hints that the rest of his family were as bad or worse), I found Calamity's "policy" and his personal horror over Bucklyn Cross were brought into sharp focus. Calamity was my closest friend, and I was only now beginning to understand and truly know him. And now the Enclave had descended upon us with "Operation Cauterize". It was one thing for Calamity to have rejected and left the Enclave, but it was quite another for him to witness the Enclave rise up as the greatest threat to Equestria.

Like us, Applejack's Rangers had lost SteelHooves. He had been their Elder and their center, the figure around whom they had gathered. Now, the fledgling force for good faced a harrowing fight to survive.

And it was not only us. All of the Equestrian Wasteland was suffering. With the destruction of Canterlot, the ponies of the wasteland had lost the greatest symbol of the fabled past of peace and tranquility that was the era before the war. It was as if the final strands of the past had been severed with the death of SteelHooves and the destruction of that city. The proof of what we had once been had carried with it the silent promise that we could, possibly, be that again. Now, we were adrift in a sea of darkness.

Within the same day, the wasteland had lost more than an icon; we had lost one of our greatest centers of ponykind with the bloody massacre at Friendship City. We had lost what little peace the wasteland had to offer. We had lost the assurance that even those living within the walls of a fortified city would live another day. All across Equestria, ponies mourned for the dead and feared for the living.

As if these wounds were not deep enough, the ponies of the wasteland had lost the voice that called out to them in the darkness, bringing truth and hope: the voice of DJ Pon3. But in this, at least, the loss was not absolute. Homage was out there, fighting back, and DJ Pon3's voice would occasionally cry out within the darkness, bringing a flicker of light before it was silenced.

And even our enemies had suffered great loss.

The alicorns had lost their Goddess, their guide and compass. They had lost the Unity which connected them and gave them purpose. They had lost the constant voice in their heads to which they had been subservient. And even now, many were beginning to lose their minds.

The hellhounds, the most vicious and deadly of all monsters in the wastelands had the heart of their civilization torn asunder, and the bulk of their kind annihilated in a single blast of necromantic green fire. Psychotically territorial, now they no longer had a home of their own.

And the Enclave themselves. They had lost one of their leaders and a great many of their ponies in what was, to them, a cowardly and heinous terrorist attack. How much of their overkill was fueled by the rage and grief of a wounded nation?

Operation: Cauterize was costing them more than they were ready to lose. They had not anticipated the resistance they would encounter, either from without or within. Their victories had been pyrrhic at best. The pegasi were facing not only loss of forces, and possible defeat, but for many a loss of ideology as well. And it only promised to get worse the longer they stayed here.

Of all those in the wasteland, perhaps only Red Eye had not yet suffered loss. But that would soon change.

Loss. It doesn't bring out the best in us, or the worst, although it can do either. It doesn't show us who we truly are. It just hurts. And it makes us all the same. Even the most sadistic raider, immune to empathy, who draws joy and strength from the suffering of others, will feel grief over a loss they suffer themselves.

In the black pit of loss, we all pray for light.

* * *

Ditzy Doo exploded… and the explosion was *massive!*

The center of the explosion was a glorious greenish-gold so bright it seemed to sear my eyes, lingering in my vision long after I had looked away. From that epicenter erupted a ring of spectral light, riding an enormous shockwave, rippling with strange colors like a toxic rainbow.

The missiles chasing Ditzy Doo were bucked backwards, exploding in the air yards behind her. Molten payloads discharged in plumes of eldritch hellfire, burning the sky above and below Ditzy Doo; but even as they missed, the force of the twin detonations slammed into the ghoul like she was made of rags. Ditzy Doo's body somersaulted, peppered with shrapnel, and plummeted – unconscious or dead – towards the ground. She was no longer glowing.

But the bursts of fire and energy from the missiles were barely noticed in the fury of what Ditzy Doo had unleashed. The ear-splitting crack of her feat drowned out their pitiful explosions. The shockwave blasted through the air, tearing off roofing from the few buildings in New Appleloosa not made of train cars, scattered debris, and tore the Enclave pegasi out of the sky.

Well, there's only one way t' clear an area that big that fast, Calamity had told me when I asked about removing part of the cloud curtain. *An' that's with a sonic rainboom.*

The realization of what I was seeing struck me, half-formed in my brain, as the shockwave knocked the four Enclave Raptors away from the city as the ring of unearthly light washed over them, tearing away their clouds. The Raptors used clouds as integral components for their locks, their computers, structural elements… and the storm clouds that kept them aloft. The mighty Enclave warships crumbled as they fell. Three crashed down just beyond the city's walls. The fourth was not pushed so far away, its corpse dropping towards homes and ponies below until a caramel-colored field of levitation magic caught it and nudged it away just enough that it struck down on a durable assemblage of boxcars just left of Turnpike Tavern.

Even as my mind was putting a name to what I was seeing, I lashed out with my magic, tossing a levitation net under Ditzy Doo's limp body, wrapping her in it. She was falling so fast I knew I would never be able to stop her from splattering against the ground, but I had to try.

Two more levitation fields wrapped around my own. A powerful one of that familiar caramel color, and a weak glow of palest silver. Even the three of us could not stop her fall, only slow her down just a little.

Just enough for Calamity to catch her.

Even as Calamity burst through our levitation fields, forelegs outstretched, the body of Ditzy Doo cradled within them, the shockwave reached the heavens, tearing open the sky. Sunlight, the purest and most brilliant light imaginable, illuminated New Appleloosa in a warm glow. It was as if Celestia Herself had descended from the heavens and was giving the city a hug.

Shimmering colors floated in the air, the heavy storm clouds releasing their moisture as they dissipated. My PipLeg began to click with gentle warning. The rainfall was irradiated. Toxic.

While I could not see it for myself, I now know how far Ditzy Doo's miracle reached.

Inside the walls of New Appleloosa, Xenith stood transfixed at the edge of a scrap metal walkway, the hood of her cloak down, her eyes lifted upwards towards the wonder above us. She was too distracted by the marvel above her to stop the little lavender filly, her newly-grown horn glowing with a pale silver light, as she dashed between the zebra's legs, galloping towards where Calamity was just now landing. But her ears caught the filly's cry.

"Mommy!"

Ditzy Doo's sonic radiation boom did not stop at the edges of New Appleloosa. I spun, watching the expanding ring of Ditzy Doo's explosion, a rainbow of glorious and diseased colors tearing outward, riding the shockwave that carried dust and detritus with it like a storm.

The sonic radiation boom blasted over the Everfree Forest, clearing the smoke and fanning the flames it didn't blow out. The shockwave rattled the windows of the Cathedral. I am sure that, in that moment, Red Eye paused to look up into the sky, realizing something important had happened.

The blast was felt in Ponyville, driving the beleaguered town's newest inhabitants underground. The toxic rainbow flashed out over Splendid Valley, driving a great radioactive wind before it.

The wash of strange light fanned out beneath the clouded sky. Looking up from the gravestone before which she was grieving, a charcoal-coated unicorn watched as the light mirrored across the lake behind SteelHooves' shack.

The thundering crack of the sonic radboom echoed through the grey canyons of the Manehattan Ruins. Staring out through his office window in Tenpony Tower, a mottled brown unicorn with a scroll on his flank watched as sunlight spilled down on a town far away, the golden glow reflecting in his glasses.

Even amongst the cold, windswept crags of Shattered Hoof Ridge, where the storm clouds were unleashing a flurry of summer snow, the glow of Ditzy Doo's sonic radiation boom was visible on the monitors inside the base station of the Shattered Hoof Ridge Tower, lighting up part of the horizon in a pulse of weird luminescence.

And just outside of town, this little unicorn mare with a PipBuck on her flank was finally feeling the pieces of that great puzzle slide into place in her head. I had spent my life searching for who I was, trying to find meaning in my existence. As a filly, I yearned to discover my cutie mark, needing to know what made me different and special… if anything at all. Outside, my search evolved into a quest to find my virtue and ultimately my place in this vast and cruel wasteland.

Now, in the light given to us by Ditzy Doo, I began to see. As each piece slid slowly into place, they began to reveal to me what I had spent my life longing for: purpose.

* * *

I levitated myself over the wall of New Appleloosa. I didn't care that I was banned from the city. Not now. Calamity had just landed inside, cradling Ditzy Doo. My heart was screaming; I didn't know if she was alive or dead. I had already lost SteelHooves just two days ago. I didn't think I could bear to lose another friend. Not so soon.

I landed on the puddle-covered ground inside, and galloped towards where Calamity sat on a set of railroad tracks, bathed in sunlight, Ditzy Doo's body resting in his forelegs. There was ichor bleeding from innumerable small wounds. Silver Bell and Xenith were gathered close to him, and others were beginning to circle. If Railright wanted to kick me out, let him try.

My heart was pounding as I reached Calamity, my eyes filling with tears as I watched the pegasus ghoul, praying to Celestia and Luna for any sign of movement. Of life.

My mind flashed to Velvet Remedy holding SteelHooves and the sobs started.

The rainout felt strange against my coat, but the warmth and true light of the sun was too majestic to take cover inside. My gaze drifted upwards to the crystalline blue of the hole above us, a yawning up-ness that that went on forever. Unlike that starry night sky which I first glimpsed through breaks in the clouds on my first wasteland night, this sky was wonderful and embracing, inspiring none of the terror I had felt before.

"No," I whimpered softly to myself and to the Goddesses. "Please no. She has to be alive. She has to see this. She deserves to see this."

The ponies of New Appleloosa were coming out of the homes and shops where they had taken refuge. They were all staring up at the sky, seeing sunlight for the first time. Most seemed shell-shocked, but slowly many began to smile.

A few specks of color swirled through the bright blue above. Some began to drift downward, chasing each other. Pegasus ponies from the world above the cloud curtain, drawn by the phenomenon.

"W-what just happened?" I heard a buck ask somewhere to my left.

"I think… Ditzy Doo just saved us," a mare responded.

I watched those pegasi fly down towards New Appleloosa, hesitant, curious. The brightly colored pegasi didn't look like Enclave ponies. They didn't wear the dark colors of the Enclave nor move like they intended attack.

They ain't bad ponies, Li'lpip, Calamity's voice whinnied in my memory. *If most o' the ponies up there saw fer themselves what's goin' on down here, they'd buck the damn Enclave and pony up t' help.*

I hope so, I thought, my eyes falling back to Ditzy Doo. Silver Bell had stepped forward and was nudging her gently, whimpering.

Poke. Ow.

"M-m-mommy?"

Oh Goddesses, please no…

Behind me, a young colt's voice called out, "Ma! Didja see it? Didja see? Derpy saved us! And… and Derpy's hurt!"

"I know, Trolley," the colt's mother said softly. "I saw."

She deserves to see this, I cried out in prayer, my vision blurring badly as Ditzy Doo continued not to move.

Please!

A shift. A slight fluttering of her eyes. One rolled to meet Silver Bell. Then Ditzy Doo whispered something… almost unintelligible, but that sounded to me, despite her missing tongue, a lot like "Sorry, love. Mommy's sleepy."

I collapsed, crying harder than ever. But now the sobs were of relief and of joy. She was still alive!

"Mommy!" Silver Bell jumped and hugged the ichor-coated ghoul fiercely. Unable to lift her forehooves, the pegasus limply wrapped her wings around the rapturous filly.

"Mommy," the little unicorn gushed happily, "You made everything so pretty!"

Sunlight poured over us. Towards the horizon behind us, the toxic rainbow was breaking up and fading away.

* * *

Silver Bell had climbed up onto Ditzy Doo, her hooves slipping against the ichor bleeding out of the dying pegasus' many wounds. I had wrapped her in a magical cocoon and was floating both of them towards Ditzy Doo's store where Pyrelight was perched just outside on a rain barrel.

We just need to get her inside, I was thinking. Lay her down next to Pyrelight. Find some bandages… there will be bandages inside. There has to be. It's *Absolutely Everything.*

"I am sorry," Xenith was saying. "I tried to keep her inside, but your daughter can be… evasive."

"Are you coming home now, mommy?" Silver Bell begged. "Miss Xenith is… okay. But she's not a mommy." The little filly lowered her voice, whispering into a ragged, ghoulish ear, "And she's kinda creepy."

Xenith's eyes widened just a moment, then coated with steel as she gazed away, Silver Bell's words becoming another brick in her conviction that she was unfit to be a mother to her own child.

I winced a little. I knew Silver Bell meant no cruelty; I could only imagine how strange and remote Xenith had been. She was still wearing her zebra stealth cloak; I imagined she spent most of her time with the filly invisible to avoid trouble with the townsponies. But those words had done damage nonetheless.

Looking askance, Xenith offered, “Have you considered training her in the Fallen Caesar Style?” I found myself wondering about Xenith’s upbringing and her former tribe that her response to an evasive child was to suggest honing those natural talents with an art of killing and incapacitation.

Ditzy Doo dismissed the offer with a shake of her head and hugged Silver Bell close again with her wings.

My PipLeg was still clicking, but I couldn’t tell if the radiation was from the pegasus ghoul or the puddles of irradiated water. I suspected that Ditzy was still shedding minor levels of radiation, even after the sonic radboom. But not at levels which threatened the unicorn filly. Nothing that RadAway (blech!) wouldn’t cure. And right now, they needed to be able to hold each other.

The click-clicking jumped as Pyrelight landed on my head. Unwilling to wait for us to get inside, the balefire phoenix began bathing the wounded ghoul in golden-green radiation.

“Nuh-uh!” Silver Bell insisted, responding to Xenith’s offer. “I’m gonna be painter! See?” The lavender filly pointed, and my eyes followed her hoof. One of the nearby boxcar houses had a crude but colorful portrait of New Appleloosa painted across it.

This wall has a mural.

I cantered in a circle, really seeing New Appleloosa for the first time since my last visit. The painting was not alone. The child’s paintings decorated many of the train cars around me, as well as barrels, carts and anything else the folk of New Appleloosa would allow Silver Bell to beautify. I could see the progression of her skills from one storefront to the next. Between the sunlight and the colors of her paints, the town felt more inviting than anyplace in the wasteland.

The light sparkled off the irradiated puddles. The warmth of the sun massaged me through my coat. I could feel the bright rays touch my soul, the sunlight breaking through my defenses, all the clouds of pain and loss that layered my heart. The breath of the sun rekindled hope, and made all the darkness of the day before seem bearable. My heart twinged, wishing SteelHooves was here with us, wanting him to see this.

A gruff-looking pony with a spiked mane and a cutie mark of a skull impaled by a bloody dagger galloped past me, a shotgun in his mouth.

My gaze followed him as he reached one of the fallen Enclave pegasi. She was just starting to get back up when the buck reached her, rearing up and slamming his hooves into her head, driving her back against the ground. “Ansf shay duwn!” The pegasus’ visor was broken and I could see her purple eyes staring upwards at him in shock. The buck leveled the shotgun at one of the pegasus’ wings, keeping a hoof on her head and an eye on her deadly tail.

I heard a clatter of metal as another pegasi in ominous black carapace armor emerged from a pile of rubble that ten minutes ago had been a tool shed. Shadows blocked the sunlight above me as three more Enclave soldiers flew in over the wall and hovered overhead. All of New Appleloosa stood in silent awe of the sun… foals and the elderly were stepping out of their homes to marvel at the sky… but the Enclave pegasi had lived above the clouds all their lives. They had grown numb to the warmth and wonder of the sun, forgotten how to notice it. All they saw was the town that had once again struck them a devastating blow.

This battle wasn't over.

* * *

Bzzzzack! Bzzzzack!

I crouched in the doorway of *Absolutely Everything* as beams of colorful light struck the doorframe and dissolved Ditzy Doo's front door into a mound of slag. The heat coming off the melting door seared my coat.

Outside the door was chaos. We were fighting in the sunlight. It felt terribly wrong. Disgraceful. The little pony in my head worried, hoping that the good ponies of the town would not come to associate something so generous as sunlight with the ugly hurt of battle.

I fumbled telekinetically, trying to get my earbloom into my ear as I fired back with Little Macintosh. Applejack's trusty revolver was the only firearm I had left. I realized with a twinge of loss that both my sniper rifle and the zebra rifle were still sitting in a crate somewhere in Manehattan. If they hadn't been looted already.

"…mission objective has not changed." a stallion's voice boomed over the Enclave's military frequency; I was almost certain it had to be coming from one of the downed Raptors. New Appleloosa was being attacked by dozens of Enclave soldiers rather than hundreds, suggesting that either the pegasi in those Raptors were trapped inside, or that beyond the city walls, the Enclave was having internal struggles. **"We are here to disinfect Equestria of this terrorist encampment. Fly steady, soldiers! For the Council. For the Enclave!"**

The black-armored pegasus darted behind an overturned pedal trolley. One of my bullets splashed into a puddle behind her, another burying itself in the trolley's woodwork. The pegasus flapped her wings, rising up to fire again.

Ditzy Doo's griffin bodyguard had produced a lightning rifle and disappeared upstairs. Calamity was further inside the store along with Pyrelight, both tending to Ditzy Doo as Silver Bell fetched medical supplies. I glanced back to see the lavender filly balanced precariously on several boxes as she tried to reach a key sitting on an upper shelf. I caught the filly and the key as the whole shelf came tumbling down, spilling cameras and teddy bears everywhere.

Distracted, I gave the attacking pegasus an easy shot, and she took it. I grunted in pain as part of my flank barding heated up, but the Canterlot Police Barding protected me from severe injury.

CRACK! White lightning arced out of a second-floor window above me. The pegasus mare screamed as she dropped, her black magically-powered armor fried. The mare was probably still alive, but without its spell matrix, her armor was too heavy to move in.

Beyond, I could see the bodies of the raider-like buck and the purple-eyed Enclave pegasus. They lay together, having traded lethal blows. Her purple eyes stared out lifelessly. His body was still impaled with the blade of her tail.

"Trolley, get inside *NOW!"* The voice came from somewhere outside and to my left.

I slipped out of the doorway, instantly alarmed. I'd seen too many foals die. The weight of the bottled ashes pressed against me through one of my saddle bags. I wouldn't let anything happen to that little colt.

Trolley's mother, whose straw sunhat and floral dress were soaked with irradiated rain, stood protectively between her colt and one of the Enclave soldiers. She had no weapon, but she stood firm, shielding her colt as he leapt up from where he was cowering behind her legs and ran for the nearest open door. I took aim at the pegasus as the magical weapons on the Enclave buck's armor crackled.

Please can't I go just a day without having to kill another pony? the little pony in my head pleaded sadly with the wasteland.

A streak of blue and white struck the ground between the mother and the buck just as *(Bzzzzack! Bzzzzack!)* the Enclave soldier fired.

The white pegasus with a mane and tail in a multitude of blues had landed, facing the Enclave soldier, her mouth open, the sentence dying before it could be spoken as one of the beams of lethal energy struck her square in the breast, the other searing through the mother's sunhat, blasting it into ash.

***BLAM! BLAM!** click*

My shots staggered the Enclave pegasus, one of the bullets piercing his armor, as the white pegasus mare crumpled to the ground. From her distressed breathing, the shot had torn and possibly vaporized one of her lungs.

I found myself calling out for Velvet Remedy before I remembered that she wasn't with us anymore.

The Enclave pegasus froze for a moment, staring through his visor at the mewling white pegasus, stunned.

"Commander, we have Citizens here," another voice called out over the Enclave's military frequency. **"Suggest withdrawal for a Shutterfly operation."**

I scrambled back behind cover, reloading Little Macintosh as a familiar khaki-coated buck with a vanilla mane raced out of a nearby train car and fell to the side of the white pegasus. One of the trio of young heroes whom we had met at Fluttershy's Cottage.

"Somepony help me get her to Candi!"

Sparks and the ring of metal on metal erupted across the pegasus buck as he came under fire from a rooftop. I looked up to see a scarred, mane-less mare in raider armor firing railroad spikes from what looked like a homemade, steam-powered rifle. The town's mayor Railright had taken cover behind an overturned workbench, a bundle of spikes between his teeth, prepared to reload.

More voices poured through my earbloom:

"…meeting unexpected resistance…"

"…not like previous encampments. There are foals here. Families…"

The Enclave soldier pivoted towards them, opening fire. A second black-armored pegasus swooped overhead, raining a cluster of magical energy grenades down on the mayor. I focused, magically redirecting the grenades back up to the attacker. They exploded with a frenzy of multi-colored light, ripping the pegasus bomber apart in the air. Blood and entrails splattered down on Railright. I felt nauseous. The bloody white intestines glistened in the sunlight.

“**This is Commander Winter of the Raptor *Nimbostratus*. Remember, these are the terrorists who supplied Red Eye with the megaspell used to murder hundreds of Enclave citizens in their cowardly sneak attack! The unprovoked slaughter of Harbinger and so many of our brothers and sisters is a day that will forever burn in infamy …**” the voice on the Enclave command frequency growled. I was struck by the dichotomy between what they told their own soldiers and the propaganda they polluted the Equestrian Wasteland with. “**…and their flagrant use of illegal and horrific warfare tactics today shall only strengthen our resolve.**”

More of my Canterlot Police Barding heated, the top layers melting as two magical energy bolts struck me. Another hit Ditzy Doo’s sign (Yes, I do deliveries!), obliterating her offer of free Wasteland Survival Guides.

Searching for the source of the attack, I spotted a pegasus in black armor landing on the balcony around Turnpike Tavern. Somepony else had spotted her too, as a green field of telekinetic energy wrapped around the pegasus, lifting her up and twirling her around. The little pony in my head winced, realizing the unicorn’s mistake a moment before the pegasus spread her wings and pushed herself out of the telekinetic sheath with a single flap.

Spinning her about had merely helped the targeting spell in her armor locate and lock onto the offending New Appleloosian; and even as my own targeting spell locked onto her, the pegasus vaporized the surprised unicorn with a rapid-fire lightshow from her integrated magical-energy minigun.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

I squeezed Little Macintosh’s trigger as quickly as I could. Several of the bullets were stopped by the pegasus’ black carapace, but one struck home in her wing. The pegasus lost control of her flight, spinning wildly before crashing into the New Appleloosian crane with a sickening crunch.

“**…Fly steady!…**”

The Enclave pegasus rebounded from the metal neck of the crane and crashed to the ground below. My eyes traveled upwards along the crane to the platform it held dangling high above the city, a platform stacked with railroad rails.

Somepony else had a similar idea. Caramel-colored magic flashed across the bolts beneath one side of the platform and the chains snapped free, the platform swinging down and dumping the mass of rails onto the pegasus just as she was getting back to her hooves. The sound of all those heavy metal beams striking ground and metal rolled across New Appleloosa like the percussion from hell’s own orchestra. I cringed away, covering my ears.

“**…And do not forget that your actions here make your brothers and sisters, your families back home, safe once… Red? What are…?**” The transmission in my earbloom suddenly went dead.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a unicorn mare weeping over a fallen guard buck. I saw her expression shift from inconsolable loss to red rage as an Enclave soldier landed in the street nearby, nuzzling the unmoving body of another armored pegasus. I knew what was about to happen; my little pony cried out a warning that never made it to my own lips as the unicorn floated the dead buck’s machinegun battle saddle into the air, took aim and fired.

The first bullets struck true, puncturing the Enclave soldier's armor and scrambling his insides. But the kick of the battle saddle knocked it out of the mare's magical hold, the gun spraying wildly, several bullets ripping through the poor unicorn herself. She stood, blood pouring down her side and flank, her eyes wide with a look of uncomprehending surprise, for at least three long seconds after the battle saddle had clattered to the ground behind her. Then she swayed and fell over the body of the guard buck she had been mourning, the life fleeing from her eyes.

Death was breathing over New Appleloosa. The grim reaper ponies were having a feast.

* * *

"STOP IT!" Calamity cried out, shooting through the doorway past me as two more Enclave soldiers flew over, firing swaths of burning plasma into the streets below, drawn out by the screams of ponies burning alive in agony. Calamity's voice was filled with rage and sorrow, sounding heartbreakingly fragile as he bellowed, "STOP KILLING PONIES!"

Horrified, I commanded my targeting spell to ignore hostiles and instead start locking onto friendly targets. The ponies in those plasma fires could not be saved. I couldn't bear to let them suffer. I wished Velvet Remedy was here, yearned for her anesthetic spell. But all I could offer were bullets.

BLAM…

…BLAM.

My targeting spell allowed me to aim perfectly through the flames. One shot each, to the head. It was a mercy, and I hated myself for it. I felt like my coat was writhing, wanting to crawl off my body in disgust.

"Attention, Enclave personnel!" a new mare's voice burst into my ear as the Enclave military frequency crackled to life once again. **"This is Acting Commander Red Glare of the Raptor *Nimbostratus.* Commander Winters has been relieved of his command. As of this moment, you take your orders from me."**

The fury of the battle waned a moment, many Enclave soldiers pausing to listen and reload.

"This battle is over. I am invoking the Shutterflight Protocol. All Enclave forces are to withdraw immediately and assist."

And just like that, it was over.

The Enclave soldiers stopped. Turned their heads to the sunny blue of the sky above. And then, almost as one, flew upwards and away from us. Like demons fleeing hell.

It took the ponies of New Appleloosa several minutes to stop firing at them. But the pegasi were fast, and all but one had managed to get out of range before the townsfolk could strike them down from below. That single mare came pirouetting downwards like a falling shadow. She hit a rain barrel, smashing it, her blood tinting the irradiated water as it rushed away from her.

I fell against the doorway, my strength leaving me. My revulsion and horror gave way to a numbness that felt even worse. Beneath that numbness, I realized I was shaking.

Ditzy Doo had saved New Appleloosa. Without her, this town would be nothing but a smoking crater. But all around me, the dead and the crying drove home that this victory was not without grievous loss.

I watched Calamity land next to the fallen white pegasus with the fantastic blue hair. Her side was rising and falling – she was struggling to breathe but still alive. (As I watched, I noticed that she wore a belt strap with a PipBuck dangling from it. It was locked closed, undoubtedly taken from the corpse of a previous owner; unable to open it to wear it herself, she had slung it over her like it was a canteen.) Calamity helped the khaki pony slide her onto a piece of sheet metal and carry her towards Candi's clinic. There were several more ponies converging on the same building. Candi had already run out of room inside and was directing everypony to line up the wounded on the porch surrounding her clinic.

I shifted my gaze away, looking into the darkness of Absolutely Everything. Ditzy Doo's griffin bodyguard was still perched in the upstairs window, watching the ascending pegasi like a hawk… or, well, a griffin.

Alarm shot through me as I realized nopony was tending to Ditzy Doo. I could see her in the back, illuminated by Pyrelight's glow, unmoving. (*Unmoving is okay, right?* the little pony in my head asked frantically. *Doesn't mean anything. Ghouls don't move much. SteelHooves would stand still for hours… oh Goddesses, SteelHooves.*) Silver Bell was sitting beside the ghoul's cot, the balefire phoenix wrapped in her forelegs. The little pony in my head stopped crying over my lost Ranger long enough to wince, remembering just how unhealthy that was for the filly. I prayed to the Goddesses that Ditzy Doo hadn't lost her entire supply of RadAway when her delivery wagon was annihilated.

I tried to pull myself to my hooves, intending to gallop over to them, but my legs refused to bear my weight. I glanced at the medical display in my E.F.S., believing I hadn't been wounded that badly in the battle. My armor had protected me, yes. But I was exhausted, emotionally brutalized, and I hadn't slept since before the funeral. The light of the sun was the only thing giving me the spiritual strength and energy to keep going, and even that had been spoiled.

And then that light began to dim.

I lifted my gaze towards the skies. Far above, the Enclave pegasi were zooming back and forth across the circle of blue above us, drawing parallel lines of clouds across the opening. Strangely, I remembered an old story about skaters scoring the ice during Winter Wrap-Up. But then, as the thin lines of clouds began to thicken, expanding towards each other, filling the gaps of blue between, I realized it looked a lot more like somepony slowly closing the blinds over a window. The pegasi were once again locking up the sun.

Shutterflight.

* * *

My thoughts felt warm and melancholy and slightly fuzzy like little teddy bears that I wanted to hug as I went to sleep. Medical treatment at Candi's was one part butterscotch rum.

Calamity had found me collapsed in the doorway, trying to worm my way towards

Ditzy Doo, and had insisted on hauling me to the clinic. I had protested; I wasn't wounded enough to warrant taking attention away from the other ponies. But I hadn't needed to worry. I had been given a cot about half a block from the over-filled clinic, been stripped of my barding, and had been given a "canteen of healing" that smelled strongly of butterscotch.

The sounds of moans and crying drifted over me like layers of smoke. The air smelt like alcohol, blood and burnt flesh. In the cot next to me was an elderly green-coated earth pony. He had stepped outside to see the sun only to have his hindleg melted. Candi was telling his plaintive grandchildren that their grandpappy was in a "deep sleep" and might not wake up again for a long time. The young filly wrapped her forelegs around the slightly younger colt and held him as she broke into sobs.

I wanted to sob too. For SteelHooves. For Velvet. For the little filly whose ashes I kept in a jar. For Ditzy Doo… even though I still had hope she would survive this. And for all those who did not. But I couldn't. I was too tired to cry. And there were too many ponies around. The little pony in my head told me that my pain, my grieving, was a private thing. I could cry with Calamity. Or with Homage. But not here in front of all these ponies.

Calamity laid down next to me, staring into the dirt, his hat tilted sadly. He wasn't crying, not externally at least. But my friend couldn't hide his pain. My heart reached out for him in a way my legs refused to.

"We'll fix this," I assured him.

Calamity stirred. He didn't look at me. Instead, he looked towards the row of pony-shaped lumps under stained sheets.

"You can't fix dead."

His voice was flat, defeated. I wanted to bury my head, hide away from that voice.

My mind conjured the image of SteelHooves walking solemnly amongst the sheet-covered bodies, bearing solemn witness to the fallen. *He should be here,* my little pony mourned. Then my cruel imagination envisioned SteelHooves as one of the bodies under those sheets. I choked on a breath and had to look away.

I gazed over at Candi, my eyes tracing the white earth pony in her yellow-and-pink striped nurse's dress. I had fancied her once, and she was indeed fanciable; but now I only regretted that she was not Velvet Remedy whose skills here were badly needed.

Or Homage. That was a selfish wish, but I allowed myself to have it anyway. Homage could heal and comfort me far more than a canteen of weak healing mixtures and rum. Homage was my sun. Her mere presence would warm me, her soft words would banish the dark shadows in my head. Her tongue, licking down to…

My thoughts were interrupted by the approach of Railright. The grey and black stallion was accompanied by the bald, scarred mare I had seen with him before. Her raider armor revealed just enough to make out her cutie mark: a black, needle-like dagger dripping blood.

My eyes narrowed.

"You gave Red Eye the balefire bomb," I spat as he approached me, opening his muzzle to proclaim something. His muzzle snapped shut abruptly. The air between us felt brittle and charged with tense, unseen energy.

Calamity stood up, leveling a dark look at the mayor pony.

The bald pony cut in, either oblivious to the discord between myself and the mayor or unable to give a shit. "Wow. I get you now," she announced. "Feels damn good t' be a goddess-damned heroine for once. Fight on the side of the angels and all that."

"Who the hell are you?" I groused. She looked like a raider. Sounded like one too.

"Stiletto," she grinned savagely. "Shattered Hoof Raiders… although I guess we ain't raiders no more. We're protecting the waste for fun and profit."

Gawd's ponies. Shattered Hoof was hiring out mercenaries. Meshed with the spike-maned pony I had seen earlier and Ditzy Doo's griffin bodyguard. Last I knew, Gawd had been consolidating her forces, but also contemplating what to do with the "bad eggs" amongst them. Maybe this was her solution for those ex-raiders not vile or untrustworthy enough to meet her talons but still undesirable to have around the house?

"And ya blew it up for him," Railright said stonily.

"He threatened Homage with that bomb!" I hissed. Then, realizing the name meant nothing to him, "He threatened all of Tenpony Tower. Thousands of ponies!"

"Yer actions put me in a rather tight spot. Ah needed t' show Red Eye that New Appleloosa weren't against him," Railright glowered a moment before glancing around. "Besides, would ya have preferred we keep an undetonated balefire bomb sittin' here in town? No pony would do that. That would be insane!"

I felt my nerves jangle with energy. Despite my exhaustion, it was taking extreme effort (Be Pleasant) not to put a hoof through his face.

"Besides, it would seem y'all are workin' for Red Eye anyway," Railright whispered. The stallion smiled oddly. "From wipin' out his slavers to wipin' out his enemies… Ah couldn't 'ave seen that comin'."

Extreme effort. Calamity bristled, neighing warningly.

"An' he seems t' have plans fer ya."

What now?

Stiletto had apparently grown bored. She trotted away, sitting down and sharpening the spikes on her armor, her eyes watching the skies.

"What do you mean?" I asked, not sure I wanted the answer.

Railright shrugged. "Not sure. But Ah've come t' tell ya that y'all are allowed back in New Appleloosa," he told me. "No point keeping ya out when Red Eye considers ya an asset. Not t' mention how unpopular that decision has made me amongst the DJ Pon3-loving herd." Railright grumbled, "Ah'm rather lucky t' still be mayor."

Stiletto clopped over and poked the mayor with a forehoof. "Griffins inbound. Looks like the big boss."

I turned my eyes towards the sky. The cloud cover had been completely restored; with over a hundred pegasi working on it, the breach had been sealed in under half an hour, casting the wasteland once again into heavy gloom. A far-off flash lit up the undersides of the storm clouds, echoed by a second flash a little closer. This flash illuminated a flock of griffins, two smaller ones flanking the flock leader as she guided them towards New Appleloosa.

Heavy raindrops began to fall.

Cold, clean water sprinkled from the blackened clouds above. Raindrops rippled the surface of the irradiated puddles, broadening and diluting them. The soft metallic clatter as the rain beat upon all the metal boxcars sounded like funeral drums. The rainstorm that the sky had been threatening began slowly, but soon Candi was corralling every volunteer she could to move the wounded inside before they were completely soaked.

Calamity moved to one end of my cot, then stopped, glowering at Railright and Stiletto. "One o' ya is gonna grab that other end an' help me take 'er inta *Absolutely Everything,* or so help me…"

"Yeah, yeah," Stiletto quipped before picking up the opposite end in her teeth. "You're a tough buck. Very impressed and shit. Shaking, even."

I wasn't alone in my trip to Ditzy's. Absolutely Everything had one of the larger interiors in New Appleloosa, and over half a dozen cots were floated, carried or dragged inside within minutes. "Well, that was an anti-shortcut," I mumbled as my cot was placed near the doorway to Ditzy Doo's room. The ghoul didn't look like she had moved. Silver Bell was curled up on top of her, sleeping fitfully. An emptied packet of RadAway lay on the floor beneath them, a little bit of the glowing orange juice dribbling from the sleeping filly's muzzle. Otherwise, Pyrelight's radioactive glow ensured that Ditzy Doo had the room to herself.

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked Pyrelight. I was surrounded by ponies yet there was no one else to ask. Xenith had disappeared again.

The softly glowing bird hooted gently. Once more, I wished Velvet Remedy was here. I wasn't sure she would be any better with ghoul physiology, but at least she could interpret Pyrelight's musical notes for me.

I felt a hoof punch my shoulder. "Why didn't you tell us who you were?"

I turned to see the amber mare and khaki buck whom we had helped back at Fluttershy's Cottage. The attacking hoof was from the mare, who managed to look both star-struck and cross at the same time. I found myself blushing, and the little pony in my head quickly insisted the extra heat in my cheeks was from the rum and definitely not from embarrassment or being hit by a pretty mare. Oh yes, the canteen. I should drink more now. Easier than responding. Yep.

"I was gushing all about the Wasteland Heroine and you were right there and didn't say anything!" the mare protested.

Was she mad at me? "I'm not…" I tried to argue, "I mean… I'm just trying to do the right thing. Like anypony would."

"Oh yes," the mare chimed, rolling her eyes. "Like anypony would. Because just anypony would risk their life trotting into the home territory of the most dangerous monsters in Equestria to set off a *balefire bomb* and clear them out." She smirked.

My eyes widened. My muscles stiffened in alarm. "What? How… You know… but…" I felt my words stumbling over each other. Of course everypony knew. DJ Pon3 had seen to that. But that wasn't something I should be *praised* for.

"Yeah," the buck added. "Way I see it, you can't have an undetonated megaspell bomb in the wasteland without some evil asshole using it to murder a fuckload of ponies." I flinched. "But not only did you get rid of it so it couldn't be used to hurt anypony, but you wiped out… what, hundreds? Thousands?… of monsters that hunt ponies for sport." His voice oozed sarcasm as he added, "Just like *anypony* would have done."

My mind reeled. I felt as if my world had been nudged off-axis. I felt messed up, the memory of what I had done merged into a vision of SteelHooves standing on erupting ground and slashing claws that tore through his armor, severing his neck.

A stallion three cots away from me woke up and began to scream, thrashing violently. Two bucks moved to hold him down while Calamity pulled painkillers from Ditzy Doo's stock, tossing bottle caps on her counter. Beneath the stallion's screams, I heard Mayor Railright announcing that Ditzy Doo's medical stock was being confiscated for emergency use. The little pony in my head stomped at that. I couldn't imagine anypony, much less sweet Ditzy Doo, trying to *sell* medicine at a time like this, but I still wanted the mayor to ask permission. Not that he could.

The door banged open, letting in a spray of rain as two colorful, unarmored pegasi pushed into the crowded store. The stallion's screams began to weaken as Calamity jabbed him with a syringe full of painkiller and pushed the plunger slowly with a hoof. One by one, the other ponies turned to stare, their conversations dropping to hushed tones or dying away. In one corner, a wife continued to sob over her bloodily-bandaged husband, but even she stole a look.

"I'm sure they brought her in here," the first pegasus – a sunflower yellow mare with an excessively curly crimson mane and a smiling sun for a cutie mark – said before stopping, her eyes widening at the stares she was receiving. Behind her, a buck with a coat the color of jade and a short-cropped teal mane looked like he was about to drag her back out by her poofy tail.

"Are you crazy?" he hissed, trying to keep his voice low. But it carried anyway. "They're going to kill you! They've probably already killed her. For all you know, this is their *kitchen!*"

The mare gave a nervous smile, a bead of sweat falling from her forehead as she looked over the staring unicorn and earth ponies. She lifted a hoof in a timid wave as she threw a harsh whisper back at her companion, "They can hear you."

The amber mare next to me stomped and nickered. "I'm rethinking that thing about how pegasuses are cool."

The pegasus mare's eyes looked back and forth over the room before coming to rest on a nearby bookshelf. "School Special: all pencils and notepads fifty-percent off," she read softly before turning to her companion. "Not a kitchen. Unless you think they're offering a hearty school filly salad with a scrumptious pencil cobbler for dessert."

I heard a few grudging chuckles. To me, the comment just brought up disquieting visions of Arbu.

"They're joking about eating fillies?" the khaki buck breathed, appalled.

"They're joking about what they think *we're* like," the amber mare answered.

At the door, the jade-colored buck took the pegasus mare's mane in his teeth and gave her a tug. "We need to go!" he insisted with a stomp. "The air's poisonous down here, remember?! She'll be dead before she can fly again. Hell, we're probably already dead."

"I'm not dead yet," a weak voice called out. A white hoof raised in the air. I shifted to spot the wounded white pegasus. "And according to my PipBuck, the air's not poisonous, Tracker."

"Of course it's poisonous," the jade pegasus, Tracker, spat back. "You're using that wrong. You always have. They don't work when you don't wear them!"

Actually, I wanted to interject (feeling a moment of pride in my expertise), radiation monitoring would still work, just like the radio. Although, admittedly, health monitoring wouldn't. My thoughts fell apart before the desire could manifest as more than a vague wish. Between the “medicine” and my exhaustion, I was flirting with incoherency.

“If the air was poisonous,” the yellow pegasus challenged, “how come all these ponies are still alive?”

“They’ve grown resistant to it,” the buck shot back. “Don’t you *ever* listen to the science station?”

Their argument was interrupted by a rust-colored pegasus in a black desperado hat. “One,” Calamity said authoritatively, “There sure as shit are places where the air is poisonous, but this ain’t one o’ ’em. Two, y’all can’t go back anyway, so best be thankful fer that.”

The buck’s eyes widened in alarm. Then narrowed. The white pegasus gasped. “What do you mean, we can’t go back?” she wheezed. “I’ve got to go back. Those soldiers were attacking unarmed civilian ponies. Elderly and foals! When my Senator hears about this…”

When her what now?

Calamity turned towards her, his expression gentle and a touch remorseful, but his voice firm. “The Enclave ’ave seen y’all down here. Reported it. Y’all were on the wrong side of a Shutterflight an’ ’ave interacted with the locals. Unofficially, y’all are contaminated,” Calamity informed them sadly. “Officially, y’all are probably dead already.”

“Don’t listen to him,” the jade pegasus blurted out.

“By the weekend, the Enclave will ’ave delivered condolences and new birth-approval certificates t’ yer families…” Calamity continued.

“Sunglint, Morning Frost: Don’t. Listen.” Tracker pushed forward. A few of the ambulatory New Appleloosians stood up and took a step towards him in response. “He’s a Dashite! His words are all lies and infectious ideas!’

Calamity stared at Tracker, unwavering. “Jus’ tryin’ t’ tell ya like it is. Save ya the heartache o’ tryin’ t’ go back.”

“You think I don’t recognize you?” Tracker accused, “You’re Deadshot Calamity. You murdered your troops and fled beneath the clouds to escape punishment. I’ve seen your wanted poster!”

Calamity sighed slightly, glancing back towards me as he muttered under his breath, “History rewritten yet again.” Looking back at the buck, my friend said reasonably, “Believe what ya want t’, but trust me when Ah say ya don’t wanna be headin’ back.” He looked at the two pegasus mares. “That won’t end well fer any o’ ya.”

“We’ve got to try,” the white pegasus with the incredible blue mane stated as she held up her PipBuck. I assumed she was Morning Frost. “I’ve got recordings here.”

“I like her,” the amber mare next to me stated, echoing the little surge in my own heart. Good girl!

“Are you saying you’re innocent?” Tracker sneered. “Then why did you run?”

Calamity lowered his head and pulled on one of the straps of his battle saddle. The other straps came undone and the whole battle saddle slid off to the floor. “Ah don’t deny Ah’m a Dashite,” he said. “Though the rest o’ that Ah take issue with. But then, if Ah escaped justice, how d’ya figure they branded me?”

“Yeah, that don’t make much sense,” assessed the yellow mare (Sunglint, I presumed). “Maybe the Enclave… lied.”

"They can't lie to us," Tracker stated in voice you use to state basic facts to slow children. "They're the government."

I sensed Calamity's desire to facehoof radiating off of him. This Enclave… it didn't make sense to me. My own thoughts swam, clutching for an anchor. I realized it was past time to ask my friend about the ponies we were facing. But first, I needed to rest. Sleep. More than that, I needed time to breathe. To mourn. My heart was bleeding from many deep wounds. *Hurt tomorrow, help today.* But today was tomorrow, wasn't it?

I had lost track of the dialogue between the pegasi. With Calamity amongst them, I felt like a poor friend to have done so. I tried to perk my ears and recapture the conversation.

"…after they did *nothing* about that dragon, the citizens wouldn't stand for them to be passive about the Splendid Valley Massacre…" Sunglint was saying.

"…can't ignore me. I'm a member of the Party…" Morning Frost insisted.

"…last time I follow you two anywhere!" Tracker fretted sourly. "With friends like you…"

I gave up, my ears plastering against my head. I lifted my gaze to the spinning fan that hung from the ceiling of Absolutely Everything and tried to let everything go.

I could hurt today, couldn't I? Cry today. Fight again tomorrow.

The first tear stung my eye then slipped free to roll down my cheek. I tried to blink it back. Not here. I should be alone.

"Hey," the amber-coated mare spoke, startled. She put a hoof on my shoulder. "Hey, don't cry. Please, don't cry."

I turned to look at her.

"If you start crying, then I'll start crying and it will be a whole messy crying thing."

Her voice had sincerity behind it. I wasn't the only pony hurting. And not the only one trying to hide it. I gave her a weak smile.

SteelHooves always hid his pain, the pony in my head reminded me. *SteelHooves was always silently strong for everypony.*

But that wasn't necessarily a good thing, was it. My soul felt like it was swimming in darkness, barely treading water, and if I didn't let out the tears, I'd drown in them.

"Who are you ponies?" a voice on the far side of the room spoke out. Before anypony could answer, the avalanche started.

"You're the Enclave, right?"

"Why are y'all attackin' us?"

"Was that Celestia up there? Why'ja take Her away?"

Some ponies were curious, most distraught. There was an ugly undertone building with each question.

"Now everypony jus' calm down," Calamity said loudly, raising a hoof.

"Ain't ya one o' 'em, Calamity?" somepony asked poisonously.

Calamity stammered, "Now y'all listen here…"

I heard a thud and a high-pitched yelp. It sounded like it came from the next room.

Somepony in the crowd pointed towards me. Past me. Other ponies turned. The steadily raising voices petered out.

Ditzy Doo was standing in the doorway. My heart soared just seeing her upright again. It was like she was her own little beam of sunlight. She looked weak, frail… like she wasn't quite standing on her own power. Her body canted slightly making me suspect she was leaning on an invisible zebra. But she was alive and awake. One of her eyes tilted towards the ceiling fan, but the other stared at the ponies gathered in her shop. Slowly, she lowered her head, dropping her chalkboard, then wrote on it.

Lifting it back up for everypony to see:

Be nice.
Absolutely Everything reserves the right to buck out ponies who aren't nice.
PS: Healing supplies now for muffins later.
Smiles are free.

Everypony was quiet.

Then the amber-coated mare, whose name I realized I still hadn't learned, walked up to Ditzy Doo and gave her a thankful hug.

Within seconds, Ditzy Doo was surrounded by ponies, hugging her and professing their thanks and their relief at her recovery. So much so that an invisible zebra was no longer needed to hold her up, nor even able to stand nearby.

* * *

"Can I get you anything?" the young amber heroine offered. "Soda? Squirrel on a stick? Anything?"

My first inclination was to decline. But on second thought, "Water would be nice. Thank you."

I watched the mare and her friend get up and push their way through the crowd of ponies who had come to see Ditzy Doo. The poor mare was mobbed.

Ditzy Doo was alive.

She wasn't healthy, not even by any definition that applied to ghouls. But she was alive. And she would continue to live. Probably even make a full recovery according to Candi. Probably.

There was also a good chance she'd never regain full health, never quite have the energy and vigor she used to. But she had saved the town. Saved her daughter. Performed a miracle. As prices went in the Equestrian Wasteland, this was a small one, easy to bear.

"Ya hangin' on, Li'lpip?" Calamity asked as he landed next to me.

The answer was no, and we both knew it. So instead of lying, I asked, "Her Senator?"

Calamity whinnied. "Ah admire 'er courage, but it's suicide. The Enclave Skyguard will have standin' orders t' shoot 'em on sight…" My friend grimaced in pain. "…t' prevent 'em from spreadin' contagion, of course."

I moaned, closing my eyes. "I'm sorry. Can you convince them?"

"Ah dunno," Calamity admitted. "But Ah gotta try. Look, Li'lpip, Ah need t' take off fer a li'l bit. Railright is demanding our new pegasi friends join him in his office for 'polite questioning'."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"Ah intend t' be there with 'em the whole time," Calamity stated with a stomp. "Whether the mayor likes it or not."

I weakly shifted a leg to touch his breast. "Good. Keep them safe." I didn't really expect Railright to hurt them, but I suspected he wasn't above throwing them in jail for "their own protection", and I doubted his interrogation would remain friendly without Calamity present.

"What's a Senator?" I asked.

Calamity tilted his hat back. "Member of the Senate. Low Council. They make the policies."

"And the High Council?"

"Enforce the policies. They're the highest judges and generals…" Calamity paused, looking at me. "Li'lpip, is this really the best time?"

I let out a groan. "No. But I need to know. I need to understand." There had been a time I had been thankful I didn't know about pegasi politics. But that time was passed. It passed when they started killing wasteland ponies.

My friend frowned, closing his eyes. "Folk down here don't have anythin' like the Enclave. It's not really an easy thing t' explain. Much less t' somepony who lived 'er whole life in a Stable."

"Railright's going to want to know too."

"Yeah, Ah know." Calamity took a deep breath, bulwarking himself. "Okay, Ah know this is gonna sound bizarre t' ya, but bear with me."

I nodded, listening. I shouldn't be doing this now. I was too tired, too frayed and too full of butterscotch rum. But part of me felt like it was now or never. And part of me thought it might do Calamity some good to explain this to a friend before having to help explain it to the mayor.

Calamity was silent, his eyes shifting. I could tell he was looking for a place to start. "You mentioned committees before?" I suggested.

"Okay, yeah," the orange-maned pegasus said, grasping that. "The Enclave runs the pegasi government through committees. The councils are pretty much jus' large committees o' ponies elected t' make national decisions. The councils then appoint smaller committees t' handle more localized or specialized… ah hell, mostly, it jus' means nothin' ever gets done."

I was already confused. "So… the Enclave… is it the country, the military or the government?"

Calamity laughed wearily, shaking his head. "Aw hell." Flicking his tail, he mentally backed up. "Okay, the Enclave is… well… it's not the country. All pegasi are citizens whether they're part o' the Enclave or not. All pegasi get t' vote fer who they want t' represent their cities in the Low Council an who they want t' sit on the High Council. It's just that only members o' the Enclave are allowed t' run fer government positions."

"And… how does a pegasus become a member of the Enclave?"

"Aw shucks, Li'lpip. That's easy," Calamity smirked. "They enlist."

So… only ponies who served in the military were qualified for government? I tried to wrap my brain around that, but it made my head spin. The Enclave grew out of an isolationist movement, pegasi not wanting to fight in the war.

"Hell, Ah figure they reckon anypony who c'n survive three years o' military education an' three months o' basic trainin' with muh father has the fortitude t' help run the country."

Ugh. The Enclave was quickly ascending to the top of my list of things that made my head hurt. It had already surpassed rock farming and was working on overtaking train engines.

"How do you even have a military when there hasn't been a war in two hundred years?" I blurted, trying to sort through my confusion.

"Oh, there've been little skirmishes," Calamity noted. "The drive to take the griffin skies was back in Radar's time. But mostly, the military acts as internal security and cloud curtain patrol."

I shook my head. "I still don't get it. Who is your Overmare, then?" Flashing back to Stable Twenty-Four, I added, "Or Overstallion, if that's what you have." This was a government. A country. Somepony had to be in charge. Somepony had to be the Princess.

Calamity let out a long sigh. "There isn't one, Li'lpip. That's the point."

I scrunched my forehead, trying to comprehend that, but it went against everything I knew about how communities were run. The idea of the councils sounded a *little* like Friendship City, but so massive and convoluted that I couldn't build a frame around it.

Calamity glanced over his wings towards the door. Railright was prodding the two ambulatory pegasi out while Stiletto stood by Morning Frost's cot. "Li'lpip, Ah gotta go."

I waved him away. "Go. Help them." As best you can, my friend.

Calamity rotated, flapping his wings and lifting into the air. The breeze from his wings cooled me.

"Calamity?" I called up to him as he began to move. He stopped, looking back at me.

"We will fix this," I assured him again. At his pained expression, I admitted, "You're right… we can't fix dead. But we can make their deaths meaningful."

"How, Li'lpip?"

"I don't know…" I admitted. "Yet. But I promise, we will. We can make this the start of something better. Something worth dying for."

Calamity smiled. It was a thin smile, but with genuine warmth. "Ah'm gonna hold ya t' that."

I smiled to him. My first friend. "Thank you."

Calamity glanced towards the door. Railright, Tracker and Sunglint had already left. Stiletto was having some difficulty getting Morning Frost maneuvered around the other cots.

I watched as Calamity's gaze traveled from cot to cot. The elderly buck who had lost his leg was in here. A colt, his body wrapped in blood-stained bandages – a victim of shrapnel, was crying into his mother's breast. One of the ragged pieces of explosion-thrown debris had slashed through his cutie mark, less than a week old. The stallion three cots away was sleeping, heavily sedated. His wife had been in the street that the Enclave hosed with burning plasma. She was probably one of the burning ponies I had shot out of mercy. The stallion had injured himself badly trying to get close to her, but his burns were less painful than the anguish of seeing the pony he loved screaming in agony, engulfed in plasma fire… of having that image seared into his mind as his last memory of her.

For once, I was the least wounded person in the room.

"But what do we do until then?" Calamity asked, not looking back.

I bit my lower lip, my body trembling. I could sense the tears coming, but I tried to fight them back. Not here. Not now.

"We do what SteelHooves would do," I said. "We soldier on."

After he left, I stared once again at the ceiling fan, my mind spinning just like its blades.

We soldier on. Until we can find a way to make this right, to make things better, we endure. We persevere. We keep helping ponies however we can.

It's what SteelHooves would have done.

"Got your water," the amber mare's voice rang out as she trotted towards me. I felt the soft impact of the canteen on my chest. I heard a pop and hiss as she opened a bottle of Sunrise Sarsaparilla for herself. The sound caused a memory to flash through my head.

Are we on a date?

A memory of SteelHooves. Oh Goddesses, I missed SteelHooves.

And with that, the floodgates blew open. It didn't matter where I was, or who was around me. I curled up and began to cry. Deep, wrenching sobs. For how much Velvet Remedy was hurting. And Calamity. For Ditzy Doo, who had nearly died. I sobbed for the husband who had lost his wife, the old buck who had lost his leg, the town who had lost the joy of sunlight to bloody battle.

I wept for the little filly whose ashes I kept in a cola bottle. And for Star Sparkle.

But most of all, I cried for SteelHooves.

⁂

Swiftly exhausted, Ditzy Doo had moved upstairs with Pyrelight, leaving Silver Bell to "mind the store" and her griffin bodyguard to mind Silver Bell and make sure nopony wandered upstairs after her. While everypony else was preoccupied, Xenith tugged my cot into Ditzy's room, giving me a bit of peace and privacy.

Cry today. Rest today. Fight again tomorrow.

I had wept for hours. Xenith was keeping vigilant guard at the door, her efforts primarily needed to keep the three young heroes from barging in to try to "help". I didn't need or want help. I wanted to cry some more. I needed to sleep.

I was out of tears. My body was exhausted. My mind incoherent. Still, I couldn't fall asleep. I was too tired to sleep. The gears in my mind had become detached, spinning free. They whirled in my head at the speed of thought, producing nothing.

So many lives were on a razor blade. So many would die while I slept. Red Eye and the Enclave… there was so much to do. Too much for my brain to grasp it. I needed a way to make it right. To make it all matter.

I tried to focus, believing that if I could just corral my thoughts, railroad them, then maybe I could finally rest.

But my thoughts did not want to go to happy places. Instead, they returned again and again to Splendid Valley and that little place just beyond its rim.

My memories fixed on the sensation of being floated out of the safe room, the super alicorn pulling me to safety. Ditzy Doo had found me. Twilight Sparkle had saved me. At least, I really wanted to believe…

She'd stared at my saddle bags. I hadn't really noticed it then, but I recalled that now. She'd seemed fixated on them.

In a rush, I suddenly yet absolutely knew that it was Twilight Sparkle, or at least what was left of her, riding that alicorn. Controlling it. And I knew how she had found me.

Be Strong! Be Pleasant. Be Unwavering! Be Awesome!

She hadn't been saving me. I found myself doubting that what was left of Twilight Sparkle even realized I was there. She was saving her friends. Saving them from a fate that literally was her own. Or maybe (Be Smart) she had just sensed herself. And, in the grip of some nightmarish déjà vu, she had come to her own rescue.

I couldn't be sure.

My thoughts slid into more jumbled memories at the sound of erupting earth.

Didja' find anythin' this time? Calamity's voice rang in my thoughts as I pictured SteelHooves' head rolling away from his body.

I choked, forcing my mind away, only to have the scene replaced in my mind's eye by Velvet Remedy clinging to Calamity, sobbing.

We fight and hurt and bleed to try to make Equestria better. But you can't stop something until you take away its reason for being that way.

I couldn't stop the raiders. They were born of the horror and harshness of the wasteland. All I could do was keep killing them until I drowned in their blood, history's greatest mass murderer.

Red Eye. The Enclave.

Red Eye claimed that he was going to remove himself from the equation. As strange or foalish as it might seem, I believed him. He was an honorable bastard of sorts. But the Enclave… how could I stop something as mighty as a whole army? A whole government, if I understood half of what I thought I did about them?

Only time they c'n act as one is when they're feelin' threatened.

Gaaaah! I just wanted to sleep! I was going to go crazy.

Surprisingly, I found myself thinking of Rainbow Dash. And remembering the rings of crackling, electrified smoke fanning out over the table map of Equestria.

That would start rain. I designed it after the contrails of the Wonderbolts! Rainbow Dash had boasted. *Everything about the Single Pegasus Project goes through me, and it doesn't get my hoof of approval unless it's cool!*

Start. I wasn't sure why, but my mind caught on that word.

Start. I could hear the metallic drumming of the rain on the roof of *Absolutely Everything.* Start. The store shook at the rumble of overhead thunder.

The towers could start the rain. Equestria-wide if they were ordered to. That meant they could also stop the rain. Make it a sunny day. Equestria-wide.

I felt the gears in my head fitting back into place in a new configuration. A new mental machine building a new picture.

Agriculture, yew silly 'corn, Radar stated. *Without the towers… the Enclave falls.*

The only way to stop the Enclave… to save Equestria… was to take control of the cloud curtain. Peel it back. Give sunlight once again to Equestria. Not only would that break their power, it would reveal their lies and show the pegasi what was really going on down here.

That was what the Enclave feared. And for good reason. If the cloud curtain was lost, it wouldn't just destroy the Enclave, it would force the pegasi to return to the surface. They would no longer be able to sustain themselves. Ultimately, it was all about agriculture.

The pegasi would either reunite with the earth ponies and unicorns, or try to invade. Judging by the three pegasi I had seen today and trusting Calamity's word, most of them would want to help.

Even so, it could get really ugly, really fast. Red Eye, however, probably considered that acceptable. He had plans for a massive agricultural base in the Everfree Forest, but that was years away from being a reality. Until then, ponykind would be struggling to survive on remaining scraps. And who knew if there would be enough?

But… there was something else. One other chance that Red Eye didn't know about.

It wouldn't take an army to stop the Enclave. Just one pony. One *expendable* pony. A pony who wasn't necessary to make things right again.

You've never been forced to give up your principles for the greater good, Red Eye had once told me. *To sacrifice yourself and become a monster because it was the right thing to do.*

Suddenly, I knew. I knew my purpose.

Bringing back the sun.

Rings of crackling, electrified smoke, the pony in my head pondered. *But what about when the towers stopped the rain and cleared away the clouds? What would* that *look like?*

Not the same. *Same is boring,* Rainbow Dash had said. At least, she had in my dream. Calamity's words echoed through my head:

Well, there's only one way t' clear an area that big that fast. An' that's with a sonic rainboom.

Despite my overwhelming weariness, I bolted upright.

Sunshine and rainbows.

"I'll be damned."

* * *

Somewhere in the other room, a rush of excited voices rose and fell, followed by somepony turning up Ditzy Doo's radio loud enough to distort the voice of DJ Pon3.

> *"…back, children. But not for long. So there's a few things I gotta tell you about.*
>
> *"First, our hearts and prayers go out to the folks of Friendship City and everypony who had relatives there. Late yesterday, in their most horrific attack yet, that airborne plague callin' themselves the Enclave brutally slaughtered Friendship City. The city's gone, children. Hundreds of ponies dead. If you didn't believe me before, believe me now. The Enclave ain't here to save anypony. They ain't our friends.*
>
> *"But I'm not bringing you a dark cloud without a silver lining, children! Here's the good news: the ponies of the Equestrian Wasteland are standing up against them. And I'm not just talkin' about our Bringer of Light, although she's been right in the thick of it. When the Enclave came for Friendship City, she struck back at them. Thanks to our wasteland heroine, the Enclave lost everything they threw at Friendship City; and more importantly, a couple hundred ponies survived that attack.*
>
> *"But she ain't the only hero standing strong against the Enclave. Remember those renegade Steel Ranger outcasts I told you about? Well, they call themselves the Applejack's Rangers now. And even as I speak, the Applejack's Rangers are working*

'round the clock to ferry survivors off of Friendship Island, protecting them on the way to new homes.

"Where can they find new homes, you might ask? The answer is everywhere they go. Even that normally stuffy Tenpony Tower has opened its doors to refugees… after a hoof-full of unicorns rose up and kicked the Enclave's sorry tails out of their tower. Yee-haw! Score one for the good ponies!

"And I've got more reports coming in. Heroes all the way from Shattered Hoof to Hoofington have been holding the line against the nightmares from above. I have a tale here of two such heroes taking down one of those warships just south of Stalliongrad. Left a calling card: Lion & Mouse. Well, tell you what, Lion and Mouse. Drop by Tenpony Tower sometime. As soon as my assistant is back from her vacation, I'd love to have her sit down with you for an interview. And to the griffins and ponies who fought off the Enclave at Shattered Hoof: damn fine work.

"But the biggest strike against the Enclave has come from none other than our own beloved author of the Wasteland Survival Guide, Ditzy Doo. You all saw it. Hell, I could see that glow all the way from Shattered Hoof Ridge. We don't even have a name for what the wasteland's favorite pegasus managed to do this morning. Sonic Radboom? Toxic Rainboom? Well, whatever you call it, I call it a miracle."

So do I, love.

"Now don't worry children. I know I just kinda let my location slip. But the Enclave already knew. I saw a whole murder of them flying this way from the tower monitors before I started broadcasting. They'll be at the door any moment. And I don't think they plan on inviting me to tea. But don't worry about me. I'm not a fighter. Never really have been, not even when I was a wasteland explorer. I was more of a hacker and repair pony myself. Fixing things up, building off of schematics, making the technologies and magic of the old world work for me. I can barely shoot a gun. But that doesn't mean I'm going to lay down and let them take me.

Any chance of sleeping evaporated at those words. I lay in my cot, my nerves crackling, anxiously straining to hear every word. Every background sound that came over that radio. It took me a moment to remember my own earbloom and tune into the broadcast on my own PipBuck-leg-thing.

"So, two things before I leave you again. First, I want to dedicate this broadcast to the late Elder SteelHooves, founder of the Applejack's Rangers. I know, with all the death we've seen, it might seem odd to single one pony out. But SteelHooves wasn't just any pony.

"SteelHooves was a hero. A protector of ponies. He put his life on the line saving others, and he inspired other ponies to do the same. A whole legion within the Steel Rangers broke away to follow his example.

"SteelHooves was a companion to our wasteland heroine as well. She was stonger with him at her side. Her victories were often his victories as well.

"When I first met SteelHooves, he was making sure Chief Grim Star died a hero in the eyes of the ponies under his care. I came to know him fairly well over the last few weeks."

Of course she had, I thought. She'd watched my memories.

"I'll tell you the truth: SteelHooves was not without his flaws. He was not always a

good pony. He meted out justice as he saw fit, and I did not always agree with whom he chose to play judge and executioner. But that is the harsh law of the Equestrian Wasteland.

"But he never faltered. He held true to his love and his principles, fighting until the day he died. SteelHooves had lived an impossibly long life. His death was swift, painless and in battle. It was the death I believe he would have wanted. And now it is our turn: to hold true, to fight and to never falter."

Tears trickled down my cheeks. I was weeping again.

"And with that, children, I have a confession to make. This broadcast? It's not exactly live.

"And I have a message for the black-armored soldiers who just burst into the station at the Shattered Hoof Ridge Tower: that thing you're looking at with the glowing blue light? A little homebrewed surprise rigged to the spark battery from a weapon made by the motherfuckin' stars!"

"Farewell, you…"

The broadcast cut off with an abrupt blast of static. It wasn't replaced by Enclave Radio. The airwaves just went dead silent. And remained so for the ten longest minutes the Equestrian Wasteland had ever experienced.

From the cot in Ditzy Doo's room, I had only the darkness and Homage's words to hold me. I could not know that my love had struck the deepest, most vital blow to the Enclave yet. I did not realize Homage had pulled the entire power supply from that alien weapon and rigged it to a bomb. I did not see the brilliant blue explosion that obliterated more than just the base station and the dozen heavily-armed Enclave pegasi inside. For two hundred years, the nearly fifty towers of the Single Pegasus Project had stood, impervious to everything the enemy and the wasteland could throw at them. I was not a witness on that snow-swept ridge as one of those towers cracked, shifted, and came tumbling down.

* * *

I awoke, disoriented by the sense of having lost time. I did not remember falling asleep. But my body was rested. I could get up, walk around again, and I did so. The metallic pattering of the rain sizzled in the air above me.

The ghosts of dreams returned to me, faded and fragmented. Dreams of sunshine and sonic radbooms.

I was hungry. And thirsty. I had a slight headache and I needed to relieve myself.

Stumbling into the store, I was surprised to find it devoid of medical cots. Instead, the store had been taken over by griffins.

Outside, thunder rumbled.

Gawdyna Grimfeathers was talking to Ditzy Doo's bodyguard. There were two smaller griffins present, adolescents if I was sizing them up right, similar enough in build and stature to make me suspect they were twins. One of them was talking to Calamity, a discussion that seemed to focus on a pair of odd pistols she carried in holsters strapped to her breast. She had one of them out and open, holding it carefully in her talons for Calamity's inspecting eye. The griffin was of similar build to Gawd, but slimmer, and would definitely be appealing if it weren't for the suspicion she was at least five years younger than me. I could tell she'd grow up to be very pretty. If the wasteland let her. The other griffin was leaning against the shop counter, a bemused expression on his beak as Silver Bell tried to sell him one random item after another. He had apparently already bought an iron, three billiard balls and an empty tin can just to keep the little filly happy.

Ditzy Doo was hovering over her workbench (literally), working on something that looked a lot like my Canterlot Police Barding. At my appearance, she scooped up the barding, taking her chalkboard in her mouth, and fluttered over to me.

The ghoul pegasus offered me the barding – it was indeed my armor, but Ditzy had repaired and reinforced it, making it stronger and more protective than before.

Her chalkboard read: It was looking a bit shot up.

I blushed. "Th-thanks. How much do I owe you?"

Ditzy Doo seemed to laugh. She set down the chalkboard, rubbing it clean with a hoof, then wrote: No charge. The Wasteland Heroine wears armor by Ditzy Doo. You're good advertisement.

The ghoul smiled at me. The smile was grim, showing too many teeth and too much of her gums. But I felt the warmth of it. She wanted to help. The advertising was an excuse.

I threw my forehooves around her, giving the ghoul a (squishy) hug. She tensed just a moment, then hugged back. Squishily.

"You're a good friend," I whispered to her. "And a good pony. One of the best this world has to offer. Thank you."

She pulled back and looked at me oddly. Then shook her head and pointed a hoof at my chest.

My guess was that she was saying "not me, you". (Either that, or she was starting an impromptu game of tag.) Before I could respond, Silver Bell ran up, her little horn glowing with a faint silver light as she floated a small pile of bottle caps up to Ditzy Doo.

"Look, mommy! I made a sale!"

A gentle, crystalline melody, like the chiming of a dozen silver bells, wafted through the store.

Calamity approached me, followed by the young griffin woman with the pistols. "Li'lpip, you're awake!"

Part of me wanted to run to him and tell him I had a plan. That I had somehow had an epiphany and I knew just want we needed to do. What *I* needed to do. It wouldn't make everything right, but it would be a massive start.

But I wasn't ready yet. I needed more information. I needed to know how the Enclave was going to react to what happened here. To what Ditzy Doo had done. And I really needed to pee.

"How long was I out?" I asked, noticing a lack of light through the windows. The store shook slightly with another rolling percussion of thunder. The thudding in my head grew a little worse.

"About twelve hours," Calamity admitted. Most of a day!

I needed to take care of a few things. I needed to borrow a bathroom and maybe some painkiller. But before I could excuse myself to care for either, Calamity wrapped a wing around me and ushered me towards the two younger griffins. "You'll never guess who."

"um…" I said uncomfortably.

"Littlepip, this is Kage and Reggie," he said, pointing to the male griffin first. He smiled wryly as he put his newly purchased tin can into his saddlebags. "Kage, Reggie, this here is Li'lpip…"

I lifted a hoof in a timid wave.

"…Bringer of Light and heroine of the wastelands."

My hoof dropped as my face went red. I hated Calamity so much right then.

"I'd say ol' Derpy did more light-bringing today than you, Li'lpip," Kage chuckled, offering a set of talons. I hesitated, feeling both embarrassed and vaguely offended to hear someone other than a small colt use that nickname, even though Calamity once told me she found it endearing.

I lifted my hoof and he shook it with mercifully gentleness, a good thing since his talons were painfully *sharp* even in a gentle grasp. I drew my hoof back, checking for spots of blood, sure he could have taken my hoof off if he had wanted too. I shifted my attention to the pretty young griffin, extending my hoof with a slight wince. I felt myself blushing slightly more.

"Kage and Regina Grimfeathers," Calamity whispered into my ears.

I froze. My jaw dropped open.

"Yeah, that's right," Reggie smirked. I could see Kage already rolling his eyes. "We're the children of Gawd."

Gawd had *kids?!*

The little pony in my head started running around in circles, protesting: *I was not checking out your daughter! I was not checking out your daughter!*

My gaze shifted to Gawdyna, who was now talking to both Ditzy and the other griffin. Ditzy Doo was holding up one of her chalkboards – I couldn't see the writing – and Gawd was answering, "Well, I can't rightly go chargin' the town fer protection if we don't show up t' protect it, now can I?"

Gawdyna is running a protection racket on New Appleloosa that comes with actual protection? The little pony in my head chuckled affectionately, *that is so Gawdyna!* Loyal to the contract.

Of course I hadn't been looking at Regina like *that.* She was a little young for me, not to mention she was a griffin. (*Gawd's a griffin,* my little pony pointed out.)

Okay, sure. I once found Gawdyna to be fanciable… for a griffin. But that was before Homage. And I was really lonely…

My eyes took in the griffin as if trying to assure myself that it was just a passing fancy.

Yes, she is strong, and beautifully built, and the scars actually really add to her presense… (*and apparently I really like older mares,* the pony in my head taunted). But Gawdyna didn't look old. (*First Velvet,* my little pony jabbed, *now mommy griffin?)* I wanted that little pony to shut up so badly. Gawdyna wasn't old. Adult, yes, but… *(What, did she have them when she was three?) …not* old. She still looked vigorous and built and… did I just have no sense of age when it came to griffins?

"Oh. My. Gawd!" Reggie exclaimed loudly, taking her mother's name in vain (!) like only a teenager could. "Littlepip's hawt for mother!"

Luna's moaning moonheat!

That burning in my cheeks exploded over my entire body. "What!? No! I… but…" I saw Gawdyna looking back at me her eyebrow lifted high over her good eye. "GAAH!!"

I collapsed to the floor in pure embarassment, trying to bury my head under my hooves.

Kill me now.

"And here I was going t' say yer boyfriend was waiting for you outside," Gawd called over to me, mercifully giving me the excuse to dash out into the rain like I was being pursued by a pack of hellhounds.

* * *

I leaned against the train engine that made up part of the hodge-podge construction of *Absolutely Everything.* It was the dark, dead hours of the early morning. That hour where the darkness lays most heavily on the soul and the hungry monsters outside claw at your door.

Rain poured down, turning the streets into rivers, washing away the radiation and the blood. The lights of New Appleloosa cut beams through the rainfall, making the falling water shimmer and shine in the blackness. Water spilled from rooftops and gurgled down gutters to splash into overfilled rain barrels. I was quickly soaked to the bone.

Nopony was outside. My utter, devastating humiliation took a backseat to the need to pee. I trotted around the side of the building, glancing around to make sure I wasn't watched, and started to relieve myself into a streamlet.

"Hello, Littlepip…" a voice said from absolutely nowhere and about two yards in front of me.

I jumped up, my heart trying to leap out of my chest. Embarrassment, annoyance and shock fought each other for dominance as I recognized the mechanical voice of Watcher.

"…oh. Sorry. I'll just be over here."

"A little late now!" I grumble-shouted. Dammit! I should have used my Eyes-Forwards Sparkle to check the area.

With a deep sigh, I brought up my E.F.S. and located the sprite-bot. "Are you all right?" I asked. Might as well talk with him. Wasn't like I was going to be able to finish after that anyway.

"Me? Yes. But…" Watcher sounded hesitant. "I wanted to make sure you were okay." And guilty. "Are you?"

There were so many ways the answer to that should have been no. But instead, I chose to cut to the chase. "What's wrong?"

Watcher was silent for a minute, the sprite-bot bobbing in the rain. "I goofed up, Littlepip." My mind strained trying to imagine a huge, ferocious dragon saying the word *goofed.* But this was Spike. "I've put you in danger."

I closed my eyes. Danger wasn't exactly new. "What happened?" Somewhere behind me, I heard a door open and close.

"Li'lpip?" Calamity called into the night.

I lifted a hoof, motioning for Watcher to hold his thought. "Over here," I called to Calamity.

The sprite-bot waited silently until Calamity had trotted up next to me, his hooves splashing in the streamlet that I had been using a couple minutes ago.

"The Enclave has security footage of you guys in the Ministry of Awesome. And High General Harbinger managed to get a transmission out of Maripony before it went up. They've put two-and-two together."

Not exactly unexpected. And was I the only pony who found it exasperatingly wrong that "high general" was an *elected* position?

Watcher continued, "The Enclave have sent their best hit squad after you and your friends."

"Aw hell," Calamity moaned.

"Who?" I asked.

"The Wonderbolts," Watcher informed us.

I blinked. "Wait. *Who?"* The Enclave had named their best pack of hunters the *Wonderbolts?* There was something in my heart (Be Awesome!) that wanted to kick their asses just for using that name. "That is *so* wrong."

"It gets worse," Watcher admitted. "One of the Enclave Skyguard ponies who saw you two in my cave was a junior member of the Wonderbolts. He recognized you, Calamity. They came to my cave…"

"Gutshot," Calamity muttered.

I remembered the pegasus: *That's Deadshot Calamity. Winner of the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years running. You don't forget the pony who beat you.*

One of the Wonderbolts (I so wanted to awesomely stomp them!) was second only to Calamity as a sharpshooter? And Calamity *never* missed!

My eyes widened in sudden alarm. "Spike!" I gasped, forgetting myself. "Your cave! Did they…" No no no! Please, don't let the Enclave have destroyed the Gardens of Equestria!!

"It's safe," Spike said through the sprite-bot, filling me with relief. "But… well, you understand why I had to get them out of there as quickly as possible, don't you?" His voice, even though synthetically manufactured, still managed to sound plaintive.

Calamity exhaled a long sigh. "What did ya tell 'em?"

"And I've never been very good at being interrogated!" Spike continued.

"What did ya tell 'em!" Calamity said sternly.

"Nothing much… really… Just…" Spike paused as if steeling himself. "I told them you had been in Ironshod Firearms."

Calamity blinked. "Huh?"

"Old weapons factory," I told him. "I met Watcher outside of it once. Long time ago," I asserted even as I realized that it wasn't that long ago at all. Two months. But those two months had been a lifetime. "Before I met you."

"Okay…" Calamity pondered. Then, "Ah don't get it. So what?"

But I knew what Spike was worried about. My mind was flashing back to when I learned that the Steel Rangers were after Stable Two, and my fears that it was somehow my fault. That when I had hacked the door for Stable Twenty-Nine, I had left something behind…

And I was a lot less careful or experienced back at Ironshod Firearms. I'd hacked into that office computer like a careless amateur. Left my virtual hoofprints all over it.

"How… technically proficient are the Wonderbolts?" I asked slowly.

Calamity frowned, shifting his position. "Depends." He took a deep breath and addressed the sprite-bot. “Do the Wonderbolts still have Windsheer and Lensflare?”

“Who?” I questioned, figuring they were names I might need to know.

Calamity rustled his wings. “Windsheer is my eldest brother,” the rust-colored pegasus told me, adding, “Dad’s favorite. Master of communications technologies. Top of his class. Graduated with honors. Made corporal. Member of the Wonderbolts…” He shook his head. “Only one of us dad ever seemed to approve of. But then, why wouldn’t he be dad’s favorite?”

I winced. “And Lensflare?”

“Windsheer’s best friend, rival, occasional lover,” Calamity said. “Expert repair pony, especially when it comes to magical energy weapons. Taught me a few tricks I used to build the novasurge rifles in my Enclave armor. Also top of his class, focused in arcanotech.”

Crap. We were in trouble. First and foremost, how could we go to war against Calamity’s big brother? Then again, considering what I had seen of his family so far, pummeling the buck might be highly therapeutic.

“Windsheer left the Wonderbolts several years ago,” Watcher told us, immediately making me feel much better about the situation. “Followed other promotions according to the press release.”

“Press release?” I questioned.

Calamity leaned close and whispered, “The Wonderbolts are the stars of the Enclave. Spend as much time putting on shows at patriotism events as they do actually hunting.” He added, “Probably more.”

Celebrities. The best hunter-killer pack in the Enclave… they tracked down and murdered ponies for a living, and they had fans. They put on shows. Ponies lined up for their autographs. There were press releases whenever they had a roster change. How fucked up was that?

“But Lensflare is still with them. He was one of the pegasi who visited my cave yesterday.”

My face fell. We were dead.

Calamity saw my expression. “Li’lpip?”

“They can get my tag from the computer in Ironshod Firearms,” I told him, my voice resigned. “And as soon as they do, they’ll be able to use their armor to locate me no matter where I go.”

“I’m sorry, Littlepip,” Spike said remorsefully. “But… you can just take your PipBuck off, right? Lead them astray?”

I lifted my foreleg, showing the sprite-bot how my PipBuck had become grossly melded to my body.

Watcher had the wits to say nothing.

“I could cut my leg off,” I thought out loud. I might even regrow it. “Or I could just leave. Draw them away.” I looked at Calamity. “Keep you safe.”

“Aw hell no!” Calamity gave a stomp. “Nothin’ doin’, Li’lpip. We stick together.”

“But…”

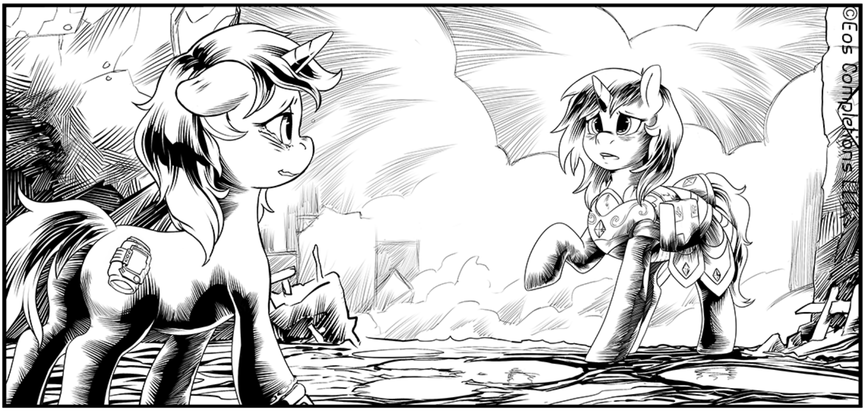
“But nothin’!” Calamity said sternly. Then he smiled. “Besides, Ah got muhself a plan,” Calamity grinned, poking my nose with a hoof. “Trust me, Li’lbait.”

This wasn’t going to end well.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Forty-One

Towards Hope



"For many of us, the road is a difficult one, but the path is always there for us to follow, no matter how many times we may fall."

Madness.

I stood there, the streamlet flowing behind *Absolutely Everything* washing over my hooves, and stared at Calamity, my jaw unhinged. There was simply no other word. Calamity's plan was insane.

Hell, it wasn't even a plan. Plans have… plan stuff. Calamity had a bunch of ideas and vague hopes tied together by multiple points of "and then something happens". We didn't have who or what we needed to even try it. I doubted we could get them.

"Well?" he asked, earnestly seeking my approval.

"I'm beginning to agree with Velvet Remedy," I told him, recalling her reaction to his actions in the Zebratown Police Headquarters.

"So… yer willin' t' give it a try?" Gawddammit. Calamity was staring at me with the eyes of a foal, hoping for my acceptance, my support of this… madness. This plan… it was something he needed to try. Needed like a starving pony needs food.

I manufactured a smile. "I don't have a better plan," I admitted. "Sure." We were all going to die.

Watcher's sprite-bot bobbed in the rain beside us, silently listening.

Finally, the mechanical voice that disguised Spike plaintively asked, "Is there anything I can do, guys? I'm really sorry."

I thumped my rainsoaked forehead with an even wetter hoof. Think. Think, you silly mare.

"Yes," I asserted, looking sidelong at the spritebot, "Yes, there is."

"What?" Spike asked.

I waved a hoof. "Just wait there for a moment. First, I need to talk to Gawd."

"What I don't understand," I told Calamity as we started to walk back towards the front of *Absolutely Everything,* "Is why the Wonderbolts haven't already hit us? The Wonderbolts are fast, right?"

Calamity looked askance. "Fast. You could say that, yes."

Lightning flashed across the sky. "Shouldn't they have gotten to Ironshod already," I reckoned, talking above the rumbling thunder. "It wouldn't take long to get my tag…" Not if Lensflare was as skilled as it sounded. And New Appleloosa was an awfully short flight from Ironshod Firearms.

"They're probably caught up in committee," Calamity snurked wryly.

I halted, my hooves growing muddy, and gave Calamity a confused look. Surely he wasn't saying they had to, what, file a hunting plan? Were all the ponies in the sky crazy?

Calamity turned the corner, almost knocking over Railright. I heard the two stallions mumble apologies as I caught up. Railright was standing under the eve of Ditzy Doo's store, apparently waiting for somepony. At the sight of me, he nodded, then cast a furtive glance towards the lights along the city wall.

Last I had seen Railright, he was escorting away several ponies who had dared to come below the Enclave's cloud cover. "Where are the new pegasi?" I asked the sheriff/mayor, wondering just how much I'd slept through.

Railright glanced at Calamity before answering. "Ah've put them t' work assistin' the community. In return, they 'ave a place in the common house till they c'n better situate themselves."

I looked to Calamity questioningly. My pegasus friend frowned, his tone sour as he informed me, "Enclave Radio broadcast an offer o' aid to 'misplaced citizens'. Tracker accepted the offer at face value an' flew off, promisin' t' contact Frost by her PipBuck soon as he was skyside. That was over six hours ago."

"Calamity here was wormin' some sense into the two mares when that broadcast came on," Railright added. "That mare with the PipBuck is some kinda ex-military, Ah think. Somethin' 'bout that broadcast spooked her proper."

I found myself feeling distinctly worried for Tracker.

"An what brings ya t' Ditzy's porch, sheriff?" Calamity asked, trying to sound casual.

Railright shook his head at the pegasus' suspicion. I tried to remember that Railright and Calamity had known each other for years. Their relationship had always been cordial, if not downright friendly, before balefire bombs and rogue pegasi got thrown into the mix.

"Getting a weather report from the Grimfeathers," Railright told him. "Thunderstorm spreads from the shores o' Bucklyn all the way t' the edge of Hope. Storm's cleansin' the air o' the smoke from Everfree, and there's nasty rainout all over Splendid Valley."

"Cuz that place needs t' be more toxic," Calamity nickered.

"Just our luck that the broken weather over Everfree is keepin' the storm out," Railright added. "It's almost like that place *wants* t' be on fire."

"Hope?" I asked Calamity.

"Ayep," Calamity agreed. Then, seeing my confusion, "Ya been there b'fore, Li'lpip. The rubble that used t' be Hope is only 'bout a few hours down the tracks."

"The town with that old weapons factory," Railright clarified. Ironshod Firearms. I remembered walking through the playground of Hope. I'd seen my first Ministry of Morale poster there. I just hadn't known the town's name. "An' ya got the Array few miles back from it, towards Everfree."

"The what now?" I asked, confused. "Array?"

"Hope Solar Array," Calamity told me, sounding a little bored. "Big bunch o' dishes pointed up at the clouds. Best Ah c'n gather, the ponies o' the old world tried all sorts o' crazy ways t' get power when the coal supply got strangled."

Now that I didn't see. Granted, the only time I'd been up high enough to have glimpsed it out of a factory window, I was a bit busy outrunning collapsing catwalks. I paused to process this. Technology for turning sunlight into energy? Made sense considering Twilight Sparkle's ministry had even been working on weaponizing sunlight.

And this Celestia One, or Celestia Prime, or whatever they're calling it can't even be cast unless it's sunny. I can't tell the Princess that the only defense we have against those missiles can be defeated by a cloudy day. *What if the zebras decide to attack us at night?*

Clearly, there were still bugs to be worked out. But even the hope of power for the wasteland was just one more reason Equestria deserved and needed to see the sun. Old generators and spark batteries weren't going to last forever.

Calamity was reaching his hoof towards the door when it swung open, Regina Grimfeathers framed in the doorway. My friend backed up as the griffin pushed her way out, nodding to all of us. The gun-toting adolescent griffin leaned against the wall where Ditzy's sign had been and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. *Absolutely Everything's* porch was getting crowded.

"Any of you see where that little unicorn ran off to?" Reggie asked casually as she lit up a cigarette. Since I was standing right there, I assumed the little unicorn she was talking about was Silver Bell.

Calamity had come to the same conclusion. "Silver Bell's missing?" She'd been inside just minutes ago.

Railright bit his lower lip. "Ah think Ah saw her headed up t' the toilets."

Oh. "Um… let's not form a search party then." I was mentally glaring daggers at Watcher as I added, "Give her some privacy." Coming swiftly on the hooves of that thought, the realization that New Appleloosa had public bathrooms struck me across the forehead like a nailboard. Ow. Dammit. Of course they did. What had I been thinking?

"Now whatcha blushin' 'bout, Li'lpip?" Oh thank you, Calamity. Couldn't let that go unasked, could you? Nope.

"Y-you were… um… saying something about… committees?"

Calamity mercifully took the hint, jumping back onto the former topic like he had never left it. "Remember Ah told ya that the Enclave keeps pegasi who c'n do the sonic rainboom real close? Well, now ya c'n see why. With all the cloud-tech the Enclave relies on, not t' mention the cloud curtain, they view the sonic rainboom as a weapon of mass destruction."

I looked towards where one of the Raptors had come down on the town. Worklights had been set up, illuminating it through the pouring rain. The silhouettes of ponies moved about it in the downpour, scavenging.

"Ya gotta realize, Li'lpip, that when the pegasi closed the sky, we'd lost one city. Just one. Granted, Cloudsdayle was the biggest, but that still left several more that survived pretty much untouched by the war. All that pre-war technology and magic… they've been repurposing and recycling all that stuff fer centuries."

Lightning split the sky. Thunder pounded down on us like it was trying to drive us into the mud.

"But they can't make more," Calamity shouted. "Pegasi can't make magic items like unicorns or zebras. And there ain't nothing up there t' build with 'cept what was left from the past. An' clouds. Clouds make fer good pegasi homes, they ain't so useful fer makin' armor an' bullets."

I remembered how my hoof passed right through the Enclave terminal interface.

"The few mountains that rise above the clouds have either been stripped of their resources or are homes fer nasty things that the Enclave would rather not piss off." Like Spike. "The Enclave invaded the griffin skies a few generations ago jus' t' get at their mountains."

Calamity nodded to Reggie, who took a long drag on her cigarette and spat a curse at the sky.

"When the war ended," Calamity added, "The pegasi had 'bout fifty Raptors, only four Thunderheads, and no ability t' make more. Includin' the four Raptors that ya took out with the balefire bomb an' the one downed near Stalliongrad, the Enclave 'as lost a dozen o' their warships in under a week. More than they've lost in two hundred years. An' four o' 'em were taken out by Ditzy Doo's toxic rainboom."

Calamity gave me a meaningful stare. "The Enclave must be 'bout pissin' themselves right now."

I wished he hadn't used that particular phrase. "Good," I said firmly. Then asked, "What does that have to do with the Wonderbolts?"

Calamity rolled his eyes. "Ain't it obvious, Li'lpip? Ah told ya: the Enclave keeps all pegasi who c'n do the Sonic Rainboom real close."

Oh. Now I got it. The Wonderbolts. Any pegasus who proved capable of performing a Sonic Rainboom was drafted into the Enclave's celebrity hit squad.

That meant that the ponies hunting us were all *that good.* I liked Calamity's plan even less.

"And when the Enclave saw what Ditzy did…" I guessed, putting the pieces together, "…they pulled the Wonderbolts into…" I searched for an appropriate phrase, "…emergency tactical meetings, calling on their expertise to try to get a handle on this new threat?"

Calamity nodded. "Somethin' like that. They have no idea how many ghoul pegasi live down here," he stated, causing me to think back to the flock of zombie pegasi we had run from in the Cloudsdayle outskirts. "And if Ditzy Doo could do it, theoretically just 'bout any sufficiently-radiated ghoul pegasi should be capable of pulling off a toxic rainboom."

Yes. The Enclave really must be pissing themselves.

"Upshot is, Ah reckon we got a few days before the Wonderbolts are hot on our tails."

* * *

Gawd was talking to Ditzy Doo when I entered the store. Kage and the bodyguard were next to them, huddled around a spool table, playing a game involving rectangles of hardened paper. My curiosity urged me to divert long enough to peek in on the game. Each griffin held a number of the colorfully marked papers in their talons, and there were six more piles of papers face up on the table as well as two face down that they seemed to be drawing new papers from as they played. I would have watched longer, trying to understand the rules, but I didn't want to leave Watcher waiting. (And besides, the game was clearly not for ponies. A unicorn might be able to hold those little papers fanned like that, but why learn a game you couldn't play with your pegasi or earth pony friends?)

Trotting up to Gawd (who was nodding at something Ditzy Doo had written on her chalkboard), I interrupted as politely as I could. Ditzy Doo stepped back, nodding with a smile.

"Gawd, there's something I need from you." I wanted to ask this as a favor, but the little pony in my head reminded me that favors weren't how Gawd worked. Gawd respected the contract.

The gruff female griffin looked down at me with her one good eye, her expression unreadable. "Sorry, kid. But you ain't my type."

Bwah? Arrguh! She thought I was…? But then, what else would she think after her daughter (!) caught me *looking* at her. "It-it's nothing like th-that!" I stomped, recovering.

Part of me wanted to bury myself and hide until I drowned in my own embarrassment. But this was too important. And besides, I wasn't interested in her like that. I mean, sure… but I had Homage. And it was very likely I wasn't going to be around much longer. The last damn thing I was going to do in my remaining days here was cheat on Homage.

The little mare in my head whimpered, *I'm not?* Not helping.

Gawdyna raised an eyebrow.

Well of course not, I mentally hissed at my little pony. She's a griffin. With children. Which highly suggested that she was interested in other griffins. Male ones. And why was I even having this discussion with myself?

Trying to get this back on track, I asserted, "You have a contract to protect this town, right?"

"Yes," the griffin said slowly, her face shifting into the stern expression of negotiation.

"But you didn't protect it. Ditzy Doo here did."

"Yes," she said again, even more slowly.

"And now, there's a really good chance that the Enclave will come after her. And they'll probably wipe out the town to get at her if she's here." I could see Ditzy Doo's eyes widen. Gawd hadn't been in Friendship City. But Ditzy Doo had seen the horrible lengths the Enclave would go to.

Gawd was looking at Ditzy Doo and frowning. "She's hired Gilgamesh as her personal bodyguard. But I take it you think I need to do more." I detailed what I wanted Gawd to do. About halfway through my explanation, her good eye widened and she turned to me in shock.

"Are you insane?" Apparently, all the ponies in this town were crazy. Including me. "I was with you until the dragon cave. But I think asking me and my griffins to fly Ditzy here above the clouds and int' the home o' a *dragon* is stretchin' the contract I have with this town a mite bit too far."

"The dragon won't be hostile. Not to you. I promise."

"You do, do you?" She fixed me with an appraising look. "Your relationship with dragons seems to have changed since last I saw."

"This dragon doesn't eat ponies," I asserted. "Or griffins." At least, I was pretty sure Spike didn't eat griffins. What did Spike eat, anyway? Just gems?

"Well, if you want me t' liberally interpret the contract t' include dragon visitin'," Gawd suggested, "Then maybe you can see yer way t' liberally interpretin' what we're getting' paid."

I was going to be broke after this. But it was worth it to keep Ditzy Doo safe. And Silver Bell. "Okay. But you'll have to take both of them, Ditzy and her daughter, as soon as… where is Silver Bell anyway? Shouldn't she be back by now?" I looked to Ditzy Doo.

Somepony should be watching that filly. The thought struck me swiftly, "Where's Xenith?"

Worry became panic when Stiletto burst in, looking nastily smug. "Hey, Derpy. That ditzy filly o' yours is up at Railright's station. Needs you somethin' bad."

The bodyguard, Gilgamesh, was fast. Ditzy Doo was faster. She'd flown out the door, leaving paper rectangles swirling through the air from her backwash, even before my mind could process what the Shattered Hoof Raider had said.

Shooting Stiletto a nasty look (and a "Then why aren't you helping?"), I raced into the night's storm after her. Gilgamesh was in front of me, Calamity behind. I heard Gawdyna ordering Kage to watch the store just before the door banged closed behind me.

Yep, this was what wet felt like. I thought I was wet a few minutes ago. Wow, was I wrong. The rain was heavier now, falling in sheets that drenched me to the bone before I'd gotten into the street. But I didn't care. All I cared about was Silver Bell. The pony in my head was biting her hooves, insisting that I should have gotten the two of them to safety sooner. Why did I have to fall asleep?

My hooves splashed in the river beneath me. Calamity and Gilgamesh were faster, reaching the station house that had been claimed by New Appleloosa's mayor/sheriff. Ditzy Doo was already at the front door.

The lights were out. Not good.

I floated out Little Macintosh, kicking on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. I tried to call out to Ditzy Doo, to urge caution, but I was too late. The ghoul pegasus spun in the air and bucked the door open, revealing blackness inside.

My E.F.S. compass lit up with dozens of lights just as Ditzy Doo pivoted back and flew into the dark maw of the doorway. It was a trap!

I lifted Little Macintosh in front of me, galloping as fast as I could to catch up.

Wait. None of the lights on my E.F.S. compass were a hostile red.

A flash-flood of light poured out of Railright's station as dozens of colorful New Appleloosians shouted in unison.

"SURPRISE!"

I nearly shot a balloon.

A cake floated into view, surrounded by a caramel-colored field of magic, followed by a familiar yellow unicorn pony with an orange-and-beige striped mane. The cake was baked in the shape of a giant muffin, echoing the many muffins on the nearby table beneath a glittering banner.

THANK YOU DITZY DOO!

Ditzy Doo stood in the middle of the room, wide-eyed, stunned. “Do you like it?” Silver Bell asked anxiously. “It’s a party!” The filly seemed nervous. “For you!” she added. I could tell from her wide, glistening eyes (and by many of the decorations) that the little lavender filly had done must of the work on this surprise thank-you party. Probably planned it. There was still a touch of Pinkie Bell in her, and at some level this must be triggering odd emotions in the young girl.

Ditzy Doo made those fears evaporate as she flew to Silver Bell, scooping the filly up against her breast and lavishing her with kisses until the girl was crying with happiness.

Soon, everypony was enjoying the party.

“Hello, Crane,” I said, turning to the yellow unicorn. “I thought I saw your telekinesis out there yesterday morning.” Crane grinned. “Thanks for the catch.”

“Thank *you,*” he insisted. “Couldn’t ’ave done it without yer help! An’ that li’l filly’s,” he added, looking over at Silver Bell who was trying to regain her ability to stand after a dizzying round of hugging. “That was the first magic that li’l gal managed since getting’ her horn back. Ah honestly think seein’ mommy there do that radboom is what did it.”

Somehow (Be smart), I was certain he was right.

We spent the next hour catching up, which mostly involved me regaling him with all the telekinetic tricks I’d managed in the past two months. To my delight, Crane was duly impressed with my creativity. But it wasn’t until I told him about telekinetically flying that I managed to surprise him with my telekinetic prowess.

“Dayumn, girl,” he said, wide-eyed. “That took me years o’ work t’ pull off.” I felt a little crestfallen that I hadn’t managed something unique. But Crane wasn’t considered the best telekinetic in the Equestrian Wasteland for nothing. And at least my learning curve was faster. “How far c’n ya get? Ah can manage one lap o’ New Appleloosa b’fore muh juice runs out.”

“I… don’t really know,” I admitted. I’d made it from the ground to Calamity’s shack. But I’d never tested to see how much farther I could push it. “I’m afraid that I’ll burn out again if I push too hard trying to find out.”

“Ya been burning out?” he asked. I nodded. “Way ya been pushin’ yerself, Ah’m not surprised.”

We both jumped as something in the room exploded in confetti.

“Good news is, there’s a remedy fer that,” Crane told me as he floated all the bits of confetti off the two of us, depositing them in a wastebin. A cure for burnout? He had my full attention. “Sadly, the wasteland might not have it fer much longer. Requires a few plants that only grew in the Everfree Forest. Reckon they’re all burnt up now.”

Oh. Well, crap.

“Might be willin’ t’ part with one o’ my bottles o’ it though,” Crane said slyly. “Fer a favor."

Right. Should have seen that coming. Plus, Crane's last favor involved a Stable full of chimeras.

"I'm a little busy being hunted right now," I admitted. "If I live through this, I'll keep your offer in mind." Maybe the first time ever that I had turned down a distracting quest. But I really couldn't spare the time. Unless… "This favor – is anypony in danger?"

"Nope," said Crane. I felt a wash of relief. "Least, not that Ah know of." Well, that was something, at least. "There's a farm out on the edge o' the Everfree Forest near the Hope Solar Array. Close 'nuff t' Everfree fer the ground t' be farmable."

A farm near Everfree? Maybe it was something in the air. Maybe the crazy was contagious.

"Sprung up outta nowhere last spring. No idea who built it. Seems like some ponies went through a lot of effort, then abandoned the place. Or, more likely, got 'emselves slaughtered by somethin' wanderin' outta the forest." Crane shrugged. In the background, I spotted Ditzy Doo enjoying a muffin. She had one ear cocked, and I suspected she was listening in.

"We could sorely use the crops, 'specially now," Crane stated. "But local folks have weird rumors 'bout the farm. First pony who tried t' move out that way came back t' town a few times sayin' it's haunted. Then he stopped comin' t' town at all. That was a while ago. Could use a pair of eyes scopin' the place out, lettin' us know if it's safe to move inta." He wiggled his eyebrows. "Assumin' ya ain't afraid o' the headless horse."

I mulled it over. "Tell you what. If I'm out that way, I'll poke around, see what I can find, and let you know," I told him, adding, "For the remedy. But my plate's pretty full right now."

Ditzy Doo trotted over. She had scribbled a new message on one of the chalkboards hanging around her neck:

Don't worry because they say the farm is haunted.

No reason to avoid the place.

Ghosts don't exist.

Just landmines.

I blinked. "Landmines?"

"Ditzy Doo's pet theory," Crane explained. "Given the bloody body parts and the places where the ground looked like it had exploded."

Meanwhile, Ditzy Doo was wiping off her chalkboard. A moment later, she offered:

Bring me any mines you find, please. I'll trade for caps and grenades.

Yep. Definitely contagious.

Silver Bell galloped up excitedly. "C'mon mommy! Xenith has started Pin the Tail on the Pony! Wanna play?" The blonde-maned filly started tugging Ditzy Doo away before the ghoul could answer.

Wait. *Xenith* started a game? Then, on second thought, regaining orientation and maintaining accuracy while blinded did sound like an exercise the zebra would be familiar with.

I perked my ears, taking a moment to look and listen to the party around me. There was music playing from an old record player similar to the one Homage had, only in far worse condition. The songs were happy and carefree. All the furniture in Railright's living room had been pushed back, and there were ponies dancing with each other. It felt like a touch of the sun's light had been captured and was alive in this room.

Pyrelight was perched on Railright's hat rack. She was bobbing her head, letting out musical whistles as she stared at her colored and distorted reflections in a cluster of balloons. I suspected she'd gotten into the spiked punch.

Spike! Crap. I still needed to tell him about Gawd and Ditzy Doo.

"Excuse me, Crane," I said hastily. "I'll be right back."

"Take yer time," the yellow pony claimed. "Ah got somethin' that needs doin'."

As I galloped out the door, I passed Gawdyna. She was standing outside, listening to the party. I stopped, skidding a bit in the mud. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "You've got a deal. Five hundred bottle caps, and I'll have those two snug away in a dragon's cave by tomorrow evening." She shook her head. "Hope you know what you're doing. Those two… they deserve a good life."

I had entertained a fleeting worry that the party had upset her. It would have been easy to be angry over the flash of panic those ponies had caused. (*How could I have ever doubted you?* a little voice in my head asked. *It could have happened to any of us,* another answered. The little pony in my head started looking around for the source of the other voices.)

I shook my head to clear it of the strange thoughts. No, the truth was that seeing Ditzy Doo and Silver Bell together had touched the gruff griffin commander, and she'd stepped outside to think.

"Thank you," I told her. I started to turn back towards where Watcher was waiting, but halted again. "What is your type?" I found myself forced to ask.

"Unattached," Gawdyna Grimfeathers told me bluntly.

The answer brought a smile to my face. From a certain perspective, I supposed that having a marefriend was like a contract. Gawd respected the contract. And couldn't respect somepony who didn't.

* * *

"Come on," Silver Bell coaxed with big, bright eyes, trying to pull me away from my conversation with Candi. "Come an' dance with me!"

I looked at the adorable little filly being so earnest and… adorable. How could I say no? I glanced up towards her mother, wondering how she managed; the wall-eyed ghoul was watching her daughter lovingly and gave me a sympathetic smile.

Waving goodbye to Candi (who notably had been responsible for bringing the "adult punch"), I followed the little lavender unicorn out onto the dance floor.

The party went late into the night.

Exhausted from dancing, I found an empty table and plopped my tail down next to it, floating over a glass of "adult punch". It had a peculiar and delicious berry flavor and shed just enough radiation to make my PipBuck click. I'd made the mistake of asking about it. Mutfruit punch tasted better when I didn't know what it was.

Xenith joined me. "The little one has fallen asleep," she stated. "We have put her to bed upstairs in the mayor's room." Better that than taking her home in the rain. Plus, it kept her and Ditzy Doo close. "The guard griffin is watching her."

I wondered if Gilgamesh ever slept. From something I had overheard, I knew I wasn't the only pony in town to ask that.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I am not a mother," Xenith said. "I can be a guard. A protector. But not more. I envy them."

"Maybe you can't be a mother," I said as I recalled how Xenith stayed to help the zebras of Glyphmark learn the arts of stealth. How she instructed them in making Dash. "But you can be more than just a guard; you can be a teacher."

Xenith didn't know what to say to that. So she drank her mutfruit punch, and I drank mine.

At the table nearby, a familiar trio of younger ponies were spending the party discussing what they should name their group. The olive pony was suggesting the Wasteland Rangers.

"No, no," the amber mare said. "That would sound like we were trying to copy the Applejack's Rangers. We need something more original."

"I know," the olive-coated buck said, raising a hoof. "How about the Ouroboros?"

"The what now?" the amber mare asked, confused.

"It's a snake eating its own tail," the buck explained.

"Ew. Why would we want to call ourselves that?"

"No, no," the buck clarified. "It's an old symbol about renewal. And we're trying to help Equestria renew itself, right?"

"You sure about that?" the khaki-coated buck asked.

"No," the amber mare insisted, shaking her head. "No snakes of any kind. There's nothing heroic about snakes." I thought she had a point. What kind of group of friends would name themselves after snakes?

Leaning over, I offered, "If you want something heroic, how about Crusaders?" I watched the young heroes' eyes light up. "I happen to know the name has a pretty illustrious history." Not to mention, they seemed to come in threes.

"oh, oh yeah!" the amber mare exclaimed. "The Wasteland Crusaders!"

I was smiling as I turned back to my drink, the conversation at the other table having become more excited as the young heroes plotted how they were going to change Equestria. I still didn't know their names. Although now I sorta did.

Calamity joined me at my table, followed by Reggie, both smiling and chatting. Struck by a suspicion, I asked, "You two have met before, haven't you."

"Ayep," Calamity told me as a pale blue unicorn mare trotted by, offering cake and muffins. I took a plate of cake and nibbled at it. Yep. Muffin-flavored.

"Calamity here built my guns," Reggie smirked proudly.

"Ayep. Met her a couple years ago. She an' her brother were flyin' protection fer caravans 'tween New Appleloosa an' the Republic," Calamity said again. Then assured me with a grin, "Didn't know she was related t' yer feathered fantasy though."

I moaned, my ears flattening and my cheeks turning red as Reggie didn't hold back her snickering. I was never going to hear the end of this, was I? "You're worse than Velvet!" I immediately regretted the reference, seeing the pain it brought.

It was contagious. I found myself thinking of Velvet Remedy. And of SteelHooves. And how much I wish they were here, able to enjoy this party with us. Without them, the party seemed…

Reggie yanked our thoughts away from friends no longer with us by pulling out one of her pistols and setting it on the table. I'd never seen a design quite like it before. "Calamity here took two .223 rifles, cut 'em down and modified 'em inta the most boss pair o' pistols in the Equestrian Wasteland."

I gave an appreciative whistle, wondering how they stacked up against Little Macintosh.

"I'm hoping Calamity here can fix me up with some more quick loaders," Reggie added, pulling out a cigarette only for Calamity to hoofwave her to put it away. "Lost a few when the Enclave attacked Shattered Hoof."

"What happened?" I asked, remembering DJ Pon3's mention of the attack on the radio.

"Lame-ass party if you can't even smoke," Reggie grumbled. Then shrugged. "They attacked. We fought back. We kicked their metal tails t' the moon. What's t' know?"

Seeing we weren't satisfied, she sighed. "Fine. Apparently, somepony high up in the Enclave has got some brains," she admitted. "Cottoned onta the idea of sendin' their soldiers on strikes against raiders first. Set the right first impression, paint the right picture o' what the wasteland is all about, an' those bucks an' mares won't hesitate when they tell 'em t' wipe a town."

Not like previous encampments, the attacking pegasus had said. *There are foals here. Families!*

Calamity was staring despondently at his cake. "Makes sense."

"Yeah," Reggie claimed, "And at the rate they're goin', they're gonna wipe the wasteland clean o' raiders by the end o' the month." She grimaced. "Problem is, nopony told 'em that Shattered Hoof wasn't a raider stronghold anymore. Well, problem fer them…"

The young griffin grinned broadly. "They didn't send in any o' those warbirds, but they sent in a whole flock o' troops. At least three dozen. And we wrecked 'em. All that fancy armor and firepower ain't worth a shit in the sky if you don't have the experience t' back 'em up."

I blinked. That was certainly a new take on the threat of the Enclave. But then, the Talons were professional mercenaries, heavily armed and with years of wasteland experience.

Reggie pushed herself away from the table. "Anyway, scene's gettin' stale, an' I promised Kage I'd bring him some cake, so I'm bailin'."

The griffin had walked about two yards away from us when she spun around, moved back, and jabbed a sharp talon into our table. "Oh, an' just so you know, wherever you're goin' next, Kage an' I are goin' with you."

"What?"

"No argument. I don't know what you all are up to now, but all of Equestria tends t' benefit from your victories." Reggie looked us over, dropping her voice. "Mom ain't never gonna admit it, but she's damn thankful fer what you all did out at Splendid Valley. The Goddess? Her plans for griffins weren't exactly pretty." No Unity for griffins. "Once all the ponies were her children, anything that could challenge them was on the chopping block. Half the reason Red Eye's got so many of our kind working for him, why some o' us like Stern are so loyal t' him…" Xenith was drinking punch from a bowl cup which clattered to the floor. "…is because they knew he was plottin' against the Goddess."

Calamity, Xenith and I looked at each other.

Reggie continued, "Way my bro and I see it, you're the best hope this wasteland's got going fer it. And you're two soldiers down, includin' your heavy gunner, just as things are gettin' their most dangerous. You need us."

This was… surprising to say the least. And not how Talons operated. Or, at least, not how Gawd did. "But, we haven't hired you." The thought was immediately followed by, "What does your mother think?"

"Y'all might change yer minds when ya hear what we're headin' into."

"Don't much care," Reggie insisted. "We're hirin' ourselves t' do this. Less you lot think you can outrun us."

"We will gladly take all the help we can get," Xenith stated. Then looked to me, "Am I not right, little one?"

I looked at Calamity again. Maybe, just maybe, we'd be able to survive his plan after all.

* * *

In the cold drizzle of dawn, I saw the four dozen forms of black carapace armor rise up over the city gates and fly into town.

For a moment, I felt panic and rage. The Enclave was attacking again! But that notion fled as I noticed the shimmer of caramel-colored magic surrounding the suits of Enclave armor and realized there were no ponies inside.

The heavy gate rumbled open and Crane entered New Appleloosa. He was not alone. Walking just behind him was a haggard-looking charcoal unicorn, streaks of scarlet and gold in her white mane. She was wearing Rarity's battle dress and yellow medical boxes for saddle bags.

Her.

Velvet Remedy halted, eyes widening as she saw me. We stared at each other through the haze of rain between us, a muddy river of a street stretching between us.

She flinched back as I broke into a gallop. There was pain between us. But the emotional hurting was eclipsed by the hope I felt seeing her again. She tried to backpedal, but I had her in a hug before she could escape.

"You're here?" she asked meekly. "Of course you're here."

"Goddesses, we've missed you!" I told her, not letting her go. "Please tell me you're back."

"I… I came to help," she said hesitantly. "I was… visiting SteelHooves and… I saw the explosion."

"She got here late last night," Crane told me. "Been helping tend t' the pegasi too wounded t' fly back home."

Of course she was.

Velvet Remedy didn't ask if they were the good guys and who were the bad guys. She stopped to help the first hurting ponies she came across, didn't matter who they were. I hoped her kindness to the enemy left a lasting impression on them.

"Ah been collectin' their armor," Crane said, motioning upwards with his horn. "Reckon it's a fit gift fer Ditzy Doo. Help repay what the town owes her." I found myself loving Crane just a little bit right then. "She's the one who took 'em down, after all."

Sensing an opportunity to change the subject, Velvet Remedy pointed a hoof at Crane. "This one's been claiming he's the best telekinetic in the wasteland," she said indignantly. "Obviously, he hasn't met you."

Crane and I exchanged looks. He chuckled. I gave him a respectful little bow, which he returned.

"Or I was wrong, as usual," Velvet sighed, watching us.

"Crane was my teacher," I explained. "Taught me how to… unlock my… telekinetic potential?" Goddesses, that sounded lame. I blamed it on reading too many *Sword Mares* comics. Too much being one.

Xenith whispered (where did she come from?) into my ear, "You must say: and now the student has become the master."

I blinked, still processing Xenith's stealth appearance. "What? Why?"

"It is expected," she whispered earnestly.

I shook my mane. "By who?" The zebra didn't seem to have an answer.

Crane walked on, floating the several dozen suits of scavenged armor towards *Absolutely Everything*. Xenith stepped back, seeming to fade into the weather. Silver Bell was right – the zebra was kinda creepy.

Velvet Remedy and I were alone in the rain.

"Velvet…"

"Littlepip…"

"No, you go first…"

"Go ahead…"

We stopped trying to talk. The silence stretched awkwardly, scored by the metallic hiss of rain against railway cars.

"Littlepip, the things I said…" Velvet began again. "They were so horrible."

I took a deep breath. Her words still felt fresh, the pain cut deep. But, "You weren't wrong," I told her. "And you tried to protect me. You were hurting so much and you still warned me away, tried to get me to go," I said, realizing it was true. "It's my fault. I wouldn't leave. A mare who keeps poking a hornet's nest deserves to get stung."

I wondered briefly if hornets still existed in Equestria. I had only seen them in books.

Velvet Remedy shook her head, her striped mane flapping wetly. "No. They were cruel. And… hypocritical." She shrugged off her medical boxes. The yellow boxes with their pink butterflies sank into the brown water. "I'm not worthy to follow Fluttershy. Or to be your friend."

I saw she was trembling. Fatigue and cold were certainly part of it. She must have galloped all the way from Fetlock. It was not a short journey. I put a hoof under her chin, looking into her eyes. It wasn't just the rain. She was crying.

"But I want to," she continued. "I let the wasteland poison me. I know that. And I was right, most ponies don't deserve to be helped. But that's not the reason to do it."

I understood. I knew what it was like to have your faith in the goodness of ponies shaken. I felt it back in the Pitt – all those slaves I was trying to save cheering for my death. But unlike Velvet, that had never been the primary foundation of my urge to help.

"I know it's up to me. I want to be stronger than the wasteland. Not let it poison me anymore…" She faltered. "But I'm not sure how."

Homage was right: *the Equestrian Wasteland is hard on heroes. No… it's* brutal *to them. It beats them down. It tears them apart. Eventually, every hero falls. Inevitably, every hero fails. The true mark of a hero is* not *that they never fail, never fall down… No, you know a true hero by what they do after they fall. By the way they pick themselves back up again, shake themselves off, and throw themselves back into that good fight.*

"Velvet, Fluttershy would be proud of you," I started. I was unsure if I was saying the right thing, but it came from my heart – that had to count for something, right? "She would want you by her side. It doesn't matter if you've stumbled. We've all done things we regret. You know I have. No pony is perfect. No pony is strong all the time.

"Do you think Applejack never lied? That Rarity was never greedy? Or that Pinkie Pie was never sad? Even Fluttershy had her Gardens of Canterlot." I gave her a tender and hopefully uplifting smile. "What matters is that you don't let your failures stop you."

Velvet Remedy stared at me a long time, tears streaming down her eyes. There seemed to be a battle raging inside her.

"Thank you. I don't deserve friends like you," she said finally. Pulling her head away, she stared at the muddy water concealing her hooves. After a pregnant pause, she let out a trembling whinny. "It's my fault SteelHooves is dead."

"What?"

She looked up. "I'm sorry. I… when you didn't come back, SteelHooves wanted to move. But I knew that clearing was where you would expect us to be. The others thought you were dead, but I refused to believe it." Her voice was slowly rising, touching on hysteria. "I insisted that we stay close, believing that if you did survive the balefire bomb, you were fighting to get to us. And we had to be there for you when you finally made it."

Trembling, she wailed, "I'm the reason it was so easy for the Hellhounds to find us. I made us keep camping so close to the same spot every day!"

Velvet Remedy broke down, sobbing. I wrapped my hooves around her, holding her tight, understanding her pain. Forgiving it and thanking her for what she had done because of why she had done it.

"Please tell me you'll come with us again," I whispered finally. "We love you. We need you. Being without you is like walking with an open wound." I hugged her tightly. "We miss you so much."

"I…" Velvet began. She pushed back, breaking out of the hug, and stood staring at me, only falling raindrops between us. "Littlepip…"

Shwaaaaaawham!

A rust and orange streak plowed into Velvet Remedy, knocking her out of sight as she was driven into the mud with Calamity on top of her.

"Velvet!" Calamity cheered, nuzzling the exceptionally muddy mare.

"Good to see you too," she said weakly. Calamity stepped back, looking at his mud-covered love.

"Oops," he said, blushing. "Let me help ya." Before Velvet or I could say anything, Calamity had flown across the street, grabbing a rain barrel from in front of Railright's station.

SPLASH! Calamity dumped the barrel over Velvet Remedy.

Velvet sighed. “Well, at least I was already wet.” And she wasn’t muddy anymore.

“It’s good to have you back!” Calamity told her, never questioning that she was.

Velvet Remedy splashed a hoof timidly. “If… you’ll have me.”

“Who’s being a silly pony,” Calamity chided.

Velvet looked up at him. “I want to be back. I want to help.” Her voice was shy of pleading.

Calamity lowered his muzzle into the muddy water and pulled out her medical boxes, putting them back over her. I watched as she thanked him and he teasingly threatened to kiss her with his muddy muzzle.

“It is like things are finally going right again, is it not?” Xenith asked, having ninjaed up beside me.

I nodded. The rain was beginning to stop.

Suddenly, looking at Velvet Remedy and Calamity, I knew. The very last of the pieces fell into place. Kindness and Loyalty.

Was there ever any doubt?

* * *

The heavy black thunderclouds had shifted to a lighter grey but were still heavy with rain as the *Sky Bandit* approached the shattered ruins of Manehattan.

Calamity was pulling the passenger wagon. Our two griffin escorts flanked us.

“Ever consider mounting a magical energy turret on the top o’ that thing?” Reggie called up to Calamity, eyeing the *Sky Bandit’s* rack where SteelHooves had stood in past battles.

Calamity wasn’t quick to answer. Like me, I think he felt that mounting a weapon would be too much like we were replacing SteelHooves. It was a silly and impractical response, the sort that Calamity had always dismissed in the past, being the first to scavenge Stables and the corpses of Steel Rangers. But this was different. This was SteelHooves.

“Ayep,” he finally said. “Ah think SteelHooves would want it that way. Want us t’ protect ourselves.” He kept flying straight. “Jus’ ain’t had the time.”

Kage flew close on the other side, talking to Velvet Remedy. “So, you follow the pony who all the medical supply boxes are made to look like?”

“Yes,” Velvet Remedy stated, beginning to get her hooves back under her. “Her name is Fluttershy, and she was the best pony.”

Kage considered that. “But… you said she was the one who created the megaspells?” Velvet Remedy had been surprisingly forthcoming with that bit of information. A reaction, I suspected, to our attempts to keep it a secret. “Which caused the apocalypse,” Kage added. “So… you’re a follower of the apocalypse?”

Velvet Remedy needed only a heartbeat to answer. “If that is the name ponies want to use for anyone who aspires to the kindness of Fluttershy, then I will own that title. Without reservation.”

Suddenly, Calamity dipped low, flying just above the rubble of the city streets. Our griffin shadows took a moment to change direction, swooping in towards us as Calamity brought the Sky Bandit to a rapid halt, pulling us into the cover of a hollowed-out Radio

Prince store.

"What's wrong?" I asked, leaping out of the passenger wagon as Calamity kicked the quick release on his harness.

"Did you not see it?" Xenith asked, her exotic voice seeming incredulous.

I didn't have to wait long to know what she meant. About ten minutes later, as we crouched in the cover of a broken sales bench, the pale grey light from the clouds was blotted out by the massive form of a black, anvil-shaped Enclave mobile fortress. Four great thunderclouds spanned out from it, two on each side. The ruined Manehattan street was rendered in stark black and white as massive bolts of lightning arced between them. Attached to each storm cloud was a Raptor. On each Raptor, one of the clouds holding it aloft had merged into one of the flying fortress's broiling thunderclouds. The undercarriage of the massive ship bristled with weapon turrets. I could make out several large doors capable of dropping war chariots or bombers or troops by the scores.

"What. The. *Hell…!?"* Couldn't we, just once, get a break?

We got a sonic rad-boom, the little pony in my head reminded me. *What more do you want?*

Even Pyrelight let out a low whistle.

"That's the *Glorious Dawn,*" Calamity said in soft awe as the huge ship passed over the Manehattan Ruins.

Noticing that we were all staring at him, Calamity coughed. "Thunderhead-class mobile siege platform," he explained.

"You said the Enclave only had four of those," I pointed out, hoping I didn't sound accusatory.

"Ayep. An' two o' 'em are permanently assigned. One's at Neighvarro an' the other is the home o' the High Council."

I did the math. Both Calamity and Pride had referred to an Enclave "regiment" as four Raptors and accompanying troops – the amount that could be carried and deployed by a Thunderhead. A full regiment had descended on Maripony just before the bomb went off, bringing a member of the High Council with them. Probably the regiment attached to the High Council's own personal Thunderhead. Hundreds of ponies, Commander Winter had said.

I felt a little sick.

"If they're committin' Thunderheads t' Operation: Cauterize, that means they're gettin' ready for their big offensive," Calamity warned. "They've lost too much, too quickly. They need big victories fast or their whole invasion falls apart, an' a whole lot o' Enclave leaders will be losin' their positions in the next election. They can't play around with the little targets anymore."

"Explains why they haven't amassed another assault on New Appleloosa," Kage reckoned. "Or Shattered Hoof."

"Where do you think they are headed?" Xenith asked as the shadow finally passed, allowing daylight (such as it was) back into the streets.

"By the vector, I'd say they're aimin' fer Fillydelphia," Reggie suggested. "Assumin' they don't plan t' park that thing over Tenpony Tower."

Fuck. Dammit, dammit, dammit!

"Calamity," I blurted anxiously, "Remember, I told you that we can make this all mean something. Make all the loss count; make this the start of something better?"

Calamity stared at me with an expression that told me he was still holding me to that promise. The others just stared.

"Well, I've got a plan. I know how to do it…" I began.

The griffins looked anxious and doubtful, Xenith looked reserved and Velvet Remedy's face bore an expression of concern. But Calamity's eyes lit up with hope, a smile on his face. Then the smile faltered as he tentatively asked, "What 'bout muh plan?"

"Your plan comes first," I reassured him. My friend looked immediately relieved. "But this new offensive throws a major wrench in mine. I need to know what the Enclave's timetable is."

Calamity nodded. He clopped his hoof against his forehead, thinking. "Okay, we haven't seen the Thunderheads before, so until now they must have been using someplace groundside as a communications center. Someplace to correlate data from all the scattered forces and relay commands."

I clopped my forehooves together. "Brilliant. We'll hit the communications center and get ahold of their timeline."

"Jus' what Ah was thinkin'." Calamity pondered the matter a moment longer. "Have t' be someplace pretty high up. Ah reckon that's what they were usin' Tenpony Tower fer b'fore they got kicked out. They'd have a fallback position…"

I remembered how far Blackwing's little broadcaster had been able to reach. The Talons had been trapped in the best possible place for broadcasting. "Horseshoe Tower." I was sure of it.

* * *

"You. Have a plan." Velvet Remedy leaned out the front window of the *Sky Bandit,* talking to Calamity. "You."

Calamity nickered as he guided the Sky Bandit in for a landing on the rooftop of Tenpony Tower. I let out a heavy sigh as his hooves touched down. "I keep coming back," I muttered to myself. "But Homage is never here."

"Now don'tcha say it like that!" Calamity shot back at Velvet as he checked his landing and detached himself from the passenger wagon. "Ya make it sound like doom on a stick."

"And your plan is why we're here?" Velvet inquired.

"Ayep. Need yer friend Life Bloom's help," Calamity admitted freely. I could see Velvet Remedy cringe as she jumped to the obvious and sadly correct conclusion.

"You're doing something with your memories, aren't you?"

Calamity didn't even look sheepish as he nodded. Hell, he looked proud of the idea. "Ayep."

"You're… not going to forget me, are you?"

That struck him. Calamity stumbled a bit. "Aw hell no!" he insisted. "Li'lpip says that Life Bloom c'n take memories without, y'know, takin' them away." He looked to me worriedly. "Th-that's right, ain't it, Li'lpip?"

"Yes. Life Bloom can record memories as well as remove them."

Velvet Remedy looked slightly relieved, but not much. "And collecting your memories is going to help us defeat the fastest, deadliest hunters the Enclave has… how?"

Here it comes. The first horseshoe.

"No, no, no," Calamity puffed up, flapping his wings. "We ain't gonna *defeat* the Wonderbolts, Velvet. We're going to *save* them!"

* * *

The mottled brown gentlestallion who met us was not either of the unicorns I had been hoping to see, but he was familiar. He had been the one to inform me of the legal details surrounding Monterey Jack's execution. And he was a member of the Twilight Society.

"…A sonic rainboom!" he was saying as he floated his glasses in front of him, polishing them with a pocket cloth. "Or, more precisely, a toxic rainboom. I believe that is what Resistance Radio is calling it, is it not?"

"Resistance Radio?"

"Oh." He raised an eyebrow as he slipped his glasses back onto his muzzle. "Yes. That is what the local gentry have taken to calling DJ Pon3's little broadcast interruptions."

Resistance Radio. I liked it. Go Homage!

"So, the Twilight Society will help us?" I asked, not for the first time.

"Indeed," the gentlestallion lawyer asserted. "You and your motley band have more than proven both your intentions and your capacity for success. We would be honored to lend our hooves to the fight." Wistfully, he added, "A sonic rainboom. In my lifetime…"

Calamity and I exchanged looks.

"Well, fer now, what we need is Life Bloom. His expertise in memory magic, t' be precise-like."

The mottled brown unicorn nodded, not even looking at Calamity. "Absolutely. I will send for him right away. In the meantime, your usual suite is ready."

"And," I added, "There's something else I needed to discuss with you at your earliest convenience. A… legal matter."

He turned, looking at me over the rim of his spectacles. "Indeed?"

His earliest convenience turned out to be in less than an hour. I was a bit surprised at the Twilight Society's sudden eagerness to lend their aid. I was probably being paranoid, but when things started working out in our favor, it tended to make me nervous.

Meanwhile, we gathered in the quarters provided and waited for Life Bloom.

"Swanky," Reggie whistled, looking over the fine sheets and marble floor tiles. She poked a talon at one of the posh pillows.

Kage moved to check out the window, his eyes darting around like he was looking out for snipers. "No kiddin'. If we had access t' a place like this, I'd find it real hard t' go back out inta the wasteland an' start mixin' it up." He drew the curtains closed and nodded to his sister who had taken up a strategic spot near the door.

"Uh… Ah don't think we're gonna get attacked here," Calamity suggested. Our griffin guards looked at each other as if Calamity was adorably naive.

"Sparkling water?" Velvet Remedy offered to them, pulling from the complimentary stores in the bathroom. I winced, beginning to feel a little self-conscious.

Velvet floated a chalice to each of them, then sipped from one of her own. "Well, hardly sparkling," she said, looking at it critically. "But it will do." This was Tenpony

Tower. When Velvet was here, she wanted to be pampered. “If Calamity’s going to be a while having his brain molested, would you like to join me for a trip to the spa, Littlepip?”

“Yeah, you ponies have it hard,” Kage mocked, rolling his eyes.

I pondered that as I stripped out of my armor, heading for the bath. After all the bad, a trip to the spa would be heaven. But right now, I just wanted to feel clean again. I’d forgotten what it felt like. As I dropped my reinforced barding to the floor, Velvet Remedy waved her horn at it, cleaning off the blood and grime. “Maybe, if we have time. But I wanted to make use of that time by sneaking into Horseshoe Tower.”

I had been right about the Enclave’s choice. We had spotted the Enclave antenna array on the roof. The Raptor circling overhead was kinda obvious too.

I looked over my companions, new and familiar. “A stealth mission. In and out.”

“Yeah, cuz yer stealth missions ’ave a history o’ workin’ out like that,” Calamity snarked.

Ignoring him, I continued. “I’ll take Xenith and one of the griffins to fly us there. And,” I admitted, “to use cloud systems.”

“I’ll go,” Kage offered. “All this fancy makes my feathers itch.”

Velvet trotted up to Calamity. “So, this plan…”

Calamity smiled, gazing into her eyes.

“You want to turn the Wonderbolts? Help them see they’re on the wrong side? Give them a chance to become heroes?”

“Ayep,” he said, his muzzle inches from hers.

“You know, part of me says that’s… awesome.” She gave him a simpering look, leaning so close they had to be feeling each other’s breathing.

“You have never been sexier…”

“That’s it!” I jumped to my hooves, floating my armor to me. “Time to go do the thing in the place!”

I was out the door, my armor floating behind me, Kage and Xenith trailing my gallop, before they started kissing.

* * *

I stepped up to the ragged edge where sometime in the last two hundred years the ceiling two floors above had given way, crashing down into the floor beneath, which collapsed, smashing through the floor beneath it. Rings of half-rooms honeycombed the internal abscess. Motes of dust floated lazily in the gaping, empty space.

It was just as I remembered it. As I looked down into the pit of rubble, the little pony in my head reminded me that somewhere down there was Pinkie Pie’s last party, lost forever in an orb.

Getting this far had been… um, damn. Why was my mind searching for a metaphor for “easy” that involved muffins? Ditzy Doo was rubbing off on me. (No, not in an icky, flesh-rotting way.)

After a moment’s internal debate, I went with “easy”. Xenith had her zebra stealth cloak, and I’d been using my MG StealthBuck II. Kage was admittedly not as stealthy, but the two of us had been scouting ahead. When things were clear, Xenith would toss back the hood of her cloak and let him know it was safe to move forward. Despite being an adolescent, Kage never appeared bored. He had the sort of level head to not be looking for a fight.

Besides his razor-sharp claws, the griffin was armed with hellhound-claw knives and wing blades. The first griffin I had seen, the one who helped attack the train, had been armed with those. I'd seen them slice the head off a pony. But I worried that they would be ineffective against pegasi in magically-powered armor.

Multi-colored light sprayed across the void, striking parts of the broken ceiling as well as a desk that had been hanging precariously over the drop. The desk melted into goo as it dripped down into the rubble below.

Okay, that was new.

Diving for cover, I kicked up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. We were in almost the same spot that three alicorns had stood the last time I was here. And across from us, almost in the same place I had been, an Enclave trooper was firing across at us with a multi-gem heavy infantry battle saddle.

I pulled out Little Macintosh, locking onto the attacking pony with S.A.T.S., but had to dive away as the spray of his weapon melted my cover.

Two more pegasi launched themselves across the gap from another floor. The trooper was laying suppressive fire while they flanked us.

The first Enclave guard came up behind us through an office to our right. Kage moved to block his path, sweeping at the armored pony with his wingblades. The attack proved my fears both valid and unnecessary. The wingblades had sparked harmlessly off the pegasus' armor just before Kage sent his hellhound-claw knives plunging into the pony's throat.

Even as the first guard fell, several beams of light struck Kage in the back. His Talon armor took the brunt of it, but one shot speared his right wing. The young griffin collapsed with a grunt, his eyes closed tight against tears.

The second guard had landed on the floor above us. I heard the clank-clank-clank as she dropped grenades down a fissure in our ceiling.

I'd had plenty of experience dealing with grenades. Back up they went.

Maybe not my brightest idea, I realized as the explosion not only killed the pegasus above us, but sent the ceiling crashing down on our heads. My magic imploded as the room above fell on me. Something heavy and searingly hot shoved me to the floor. Pain sprouted from my hindlegs.

I was pinned underneath jagged floorboards and the melted remains of a filing cabinet.

Kage had taken cover in the doorway. I had lost track of Xenith. Fortunately, I was still invisible as the trooper across from us started filling our room with magical energy. The debris was ablative cover at best.

I whipped my head around, desperately looking for where Little Macintosh had fallen.

The spray of rainbow light stopped as the trooper reloaded. My revolver dropped to the floor next to me, a gift from an invisible zebra. I magically snatched it up and locked my targeting spell onto the pegasus again.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

"Section Twelve clear!" the pegasus barked through my earbloom. ***"Cauterizing in ten minutes."***

With the Thunderheads in play, this place had become redundant. The Enclave had already been clearing out when we arrived. The Raptor above hadn't been here for protection.

We had seven minutes before the Raptor opened fire, eradicating Horseshoe Tower.

"Section Thirteen clear!" another voice replied.

My StealthBuck was drained. But we were almost at the end.

The last room before the roof was a two-level executive bar and lounge. That was where they had their equipment set up. The good news was that our infiltration sped up their evacuation. They were no longer trying to pull out all their equipment, just their personnel. They would let the Raptor's massive guns take care of the rest.

"Section Fourteen clear!" the first voice responded. ***"Cauterizing in nine minutes."***

The bad news was that the room would be a killing zone. All the soldiers left in the building were either on the roof or inside that lounge.

I made sure Little Macintosh was loaded with armor-piercing bullets. Calamity had bought up all the ammo for Litte Macintosh that Ditzy Doo had, but already I was almost out of armor piercing rounds again. Part of me hated the Enclave for using magical energy weapons; their ammo crates never had anything I could use.

I nodded to my two companions. "Here. We. Go!"

I telekinetically threw the doors open, my targeting spell locking on to each soldier as I saw them. An Enclave maneframe dominated the room. Cables snaked off of it, crawling into the backsides of cloud-interface terminals that sat glowing on surrounding cocktail tables. The room was cold. A row of windows lined the right wall opposite the bar on the left. A couple were still intact, but most had been boarded up. Poorly. Enclave infantry were standing guard, both on this floor and along the balcony above. Grey-clad officers and technician ponies in yellow dresses darted about, rarely landing. Most were headed for the stairs.

Two Enclave soldiers stood ready just inside the door. They were the first to react. I was faster.

BLAM! BLAM! The first went down. ***BLAM! BLAM!*** The third shot killed the other door guard, the fourth bullet burying itself into a corpse.

Two shots to the head of each opponent. Two, in case one missed or just failed to kill. Two shots and move on to the next. Leave anypony still standing for Kage and Xenith.

Whoooooosh!

One of the Enclave infantry on the balcony fired a missile at us. I dove for cover behind the bar. Kage flopped over the bar next to me, half-jumping, half propelled by the explosion.

Xenith, goopy-hooved, charged across the ceiling. The explosion had blown her hood back, and she was bleeding from small shrapnel wounds. Several Enclave soldiers opened fire, blasting apart the ceiling with a prismatic lightshow. Ancient crystal chandeliers came crashing to the floor with an almost melodic tinkling. Xenith managed to dodge them all, leaping from the ceiling to the balcony railing. Her forehooves planted on the railing as she spun, driving bucking hooves into the throat of the infantry pony as he reloaded and tried to aim. I could hear his armor crush into his windpipe. The infantry pegasus pulled the trigger as he collapsed, the missile firing wild, striking the faded painting of a mare in a sultry position which hung above the far side of the lounge. The explosion blew out what was left of the windows.

A damp, early-evening wind blew in from outside, clearing the smoke.

BLAM! BLAM! Reload. My targeting spell dropped only for me to bring it back up immediately, squeezing just a little more out of it.

Another pony with a multi-gem weapon sent a rainbow of light spraying over the bar and tearing into the liquor bottles racked behind us. Most of the bottles were empty, but the racks behind us hissed and exploded as the magical light passed through several still-full ones, boiling the liquid inside. I let out a scream as I was bathed in alcoholic steam. Kage yelled, leaping the bar and trying to charge the attacker before he could reload, his injured wing keeping him from flying.

I tried to give him cover, targeting another infantry pegasus who was aiming for Kage with the twin magical-energy rifles of his armor. ***BLAM! BLAM!*** One of those shots missed. The other struck home, but failed to penetrate enough to kill the enemy.

The Enclave soldier Kage was charging was just a little too fast; she had finished reloading, and opened fire point blank into the griffin's chest. It didn't save her. Kage's blades slashed deeply through her chest, cutting her heart, even as his Talon armor dissolved. The griffin fell back, smoke rising from a gaping wound in his breast. I stared in horror as the light went out of his eyes.

No! Dammit, no!

With a loud crack, a black-armored body toppled over the balcony, bucked through the railing by Xenith. I looked up for her, but she was invisible again.

"Cauterizing in eight minutes."

The pegasus I had wounded had taken refuge behind the maneframe. I could see his shadow as he downed a healing potion. At the same time, another soldier flew across the room, landing behind one of the columns that supported the balcony along the near wall. A third knocked over a table and hid behind it, shoving it forward through the room, trying to get closer to me. She yelped as the table caught on one of the cables and flipped, exposing her.

BLAM! BLAM! The battle raged on.

⁂

The last pegasus, a grey stallion with a flowing black mane and tail, held up a hoof in surrender. He was neither a technician nor a soldier; he wore a light grey officer's uniform that went smartly with his coat. The only officer to stay behind, making sure other officers and the technician ponies got out safely while the Enclave's troops tried to kill us.

Did kill one of us, I thought heavily. I'd led Gawd's son to his death. I didn't know how I was going to break the news to his sister. I'd never be able to face Gawdyna again. But right now I didn't blame myself. I blamed the Enclave.

"Give me one reason not to shoot you," I growled. "Make it good, because I *really* want to."

"Way Ah see it," the pegasus said, smiling annoyingly, "Y'all c'n kill me, or y'all c'n win."

"Evac complete. Moving off," The voice in my earbloom claimed. ***"Cauterizing in five minutes."***

"What do you mean?" I asked, leveling Little Macintosh at the Enclave officer's face. I had my targeting spell locked on for good measure.

"Sir, we've still got one officer inside," another pegasus said over the military channel.

"Cauterizing in five minutes!" was the cold response.

"Well, Ah reckon y'all didn't come all this way jus' cuz ya like bein' shot at," the officer reasoned. "I'm guessin' what ya came fer is in that maneframe. But now, ya only got 'bout four minutes left t' get yer tails outta this building, an' yer down the only person ya had who coulda accessed it."

Fuck! Celestias fiery hemorrhoids of solar-flarin' death! Kage died for *nothing!*

"So Ah'll make ya a deal," the officer said. "Y'all let me go, an' I'll download what ya need inta that Pip-what-the-fuck ya got there."

"And why would you betray the Enclave?" Xenith asked. "Why would you help us?"

"Well, two reasons," the pegasus said, still smiling but with an earnest tone in his voice. "One, cuz y'folk are Calamity's friends. Ah love muh li'l brother, an' Ah ain't happy t' see his name onna kill list. Two, cuz Ah reckon without any fliers with ya, chances are, three minutes won't be 'nuff fer ya t' get out anyway."

I would have stopped to think about that, to process what he said, but the voice in my earbloom announced, ***"Cauterizing in four minutes!"***

"Okay!" I agreed, motioning for the pegasus to get to work. I chose to believe him. Not because of what he said about Calamity, but because he hadn't lied about how much time we had.

"You're Windsheer, right?" I asked as the stallion moved to the nearest terminal. Calamity had said his oldest brother was a master of communications technologies. "You were the chief communications officer here?" I guessed.

"Ayep t' both," he said and he worked. I caught the password: Restricted.

"Now what 'xactly d'y'all want? Cuz Ah could give ya everythin', but that would take longer than ya got."

"I need to know what the Enclave is doing next, and when," I answered, the gears in my head spinning. "What's the chance that two of Calamity's brother's would be down here?" I pondered as he started the download.

"Cauterizing in three minutes!" We were cutting it insanely close!

"Ah'd say one-hundred percent," Windsheer said with a smile, backing away from the terminal. "They put Autumn Leaf in charge o' Operation: Cauterize, an' he made sure both his other brothers were part o' the show." The grey pegasus chuckled. "Hell, that was the only way Pride was ever gonna see anything outside Neighverro."

I groaned, hanging my head in pain. One of Calamity's brothers was commanding this entire damn massacre.

"Ah'll be goin' now," Windsheer said. "But ya pass muh love on t' Calamity, won'tcha?"

"Your love?" Xenith asked. "Did you not all treat him horribly?"

Windsheer shrugged. "We were kids."

Xenith stomped. “Not an excuse.”

“Look, Pride did it ’cause he was a bastard. An’ worse, an incompetent bastard. Unlike Calamity, he was nothin’ but a disappointment t’ dad. He did it’ cuz Autumn Leaf did it an’ he hoped copyin’ Autumn Leaf would get him some respect from us.” Windsheer added, “It didn’t.”

The voice in my earbloom spoke again. ***“Cauterizing in two minutes!”***

“As fer Autumn Leaf an’ muhself? We remembered what dad was like b’fore mom died,” he said only half-apologetically. “He was better before that, not always the drill sergeant. We’d lost our mom, we’d lost the best part o’ our dad… we were hurtin’. An’ Calamity was there.”

Windsheer shrugged again. Then flew off towards one of the open windows.

The download completed.

I turned to Xenith, wrapping her first with my magic, then myself. I galloped for the window.

“Cauterizing in one minute!” my earbloom informed me as I leapt out the shattered window and into the cold open air.

The Raptor had backed off far enough that I doubted they could see us. The barrels of their huge magical energy cannons were glowing like miniature suns as they charged up to fire.

The sky split, the air tearing apart as multiple beams of orange-white plasma tore into Horseshoe Tower. Every remaining window exploded outward, shards of glass followed by gouts of flame.

I turned away from the sight, focusing completely on moving us away from doomed skyscraper. Sweat was already pouring down my forehead. I was going to see just how far I could fly after all.

* * *

When we arrived back at Tenpony Tower, it was by way of the Celestia Line, and Xenith was carrying me on her back. I was feeling rather proud of myself. I’d gotten us a little over a mile before strain and exhaustion forced me to put us down in one of the Four Stars stations.

Proud and oh so very, very tired. I was ready to take Velvet Remedy up on that trip to the spa now. Only it was very late, the spa would be closed, and I had to face Regina Grimfeathers.

I poured over the data Windsheer had given us. The stallion had been true to his word. We got what I had asked for and no more.

The Enclave was focusing now on what it considered the two biggest threats. First and foremost was Red Eye. They had tracked him to the Cathedral. They had a regiment patrolling the borders of the Everfree Forest, trying to make sure he didn’t escape. In two days time, the *Overcast* – Colonel Autumn Leaf’s command Thunderhead – was going to move in with a second full regiment and wipe the Cathedral off the face of Equestria.

The Glorious Dawn was being dispatched to a rendezvous with the bulk of the Enclave’s forces, amassing for an attack on Fillydelphia. And by attack, they meant cleansing. Slavers, slaves, Rangers, scavengers… they were going to kill them all, and reduce the factories that Red Eye had rebuilt to rubble for good measure.

And they could. I'd just seen them turn Horseshoe Tower into a mound of rubble and slag.

I couldn't let that happen.

My blood ran cold as I saw the Enclave's second target. Homage. Somehow, my marefriend had rated as the second biggest threat to the Enclave. Attached to that assessment was a video file. I was trembling as I pulled it open, but I don't know if it was from fear or rage.

The video was from the security camera of a Raptor. I watched as Homage brought down the Shattered Hoof Ridge Tower. The explosion from the star blaster had disintegrated everything it touched; it had eaten the tower's base.

They didn't know she could only do that once. They only knew that she did it. And that made her even more terrifying than Ditzy Doo. Almost as much as Red Eye and all his armies.

I realized that, strangely, I wasn't frightened or mad anymore. I was proud. Proud of my wonderful, dangerous Homage.

And they had no idea what to do about it. Sending more forces after her risked, in their minds, further retaliation. And that could mean the destruction of another tower. Maybe more. So instead, they were sitting on their hooves.

Well, not exactly. They had given lethal sanction to the one group they thought could actually hunt down and kill Homage without her being able to strike back. The Wonderbolts.

Calamity had been right; the Wonderbolts had been drawn into meetings. But those were due to end in about six hours. After that, our hunters had been given thirty-two hours to complete their current assignment. Then they were ordered to focus their efforts on murdering my marefriend.

Thirty-two hours.

I prayed they would do what I so desperately wanted to: sleep. After over twenty hours of meetings, what pony wouldn't want to catch some sleep, making sure they were fresh and revived before they went hunting other ponies down and killing them?

Xenith nudged open the door to our suite and deposited me on the floor with an undignified thump. I yelped as I landed on my scalded back.

Calamity trotted over, looking down at me. "How'd it go?" I was surprised that he was still in the room. Or was it back in the room?

Life Bloom walked up next to him as Velvet gave the gasp we were all expecting and dashed to tend to our wounds, starting with the bloody zebra.

"Windsheer sends his love," I answered.

I winced as a female voice called out from the corner. "Where's Kage?"

* * *

Regina Grimfeathers stared down at her twin brother's knives. Then carefully slid them into her belt. "Thank you for bringing these back."

"Regina, I'm so sorry."

"There is no body," Xenith informed her. "The Enclave…"

"Shut it about the bloody Enclave!" the griffin roared.

The room was shocked quiet.

Calamity finally broke the silence. "What now?"

Regina Grimfeathers scowled at him. "What do you mean, 'what now'?" she asked gruffly. "The job ain't over yet, is it?"

"You're… staying…?" Velvet gaped.

"Grimfeathers don't turn tail an' run when it gets nasty," she spat.

The young griffin woman laid down. Her eyes were moist, but she had yet to shed a tear. Almost under her breath, she added, "An' I sure as hell ain't goin' back t' tell Gawd that I quit the job that killed Kage."

Velvet floated a healing potion to me as she magically stripped off my armor and began inspecting me for wounds. It was as if she had never left.

"So," Reggie said finally, "What now?"

Life Bloom spoke up, "Now, I gather together what I need for a trip."

"Say what now?"

The unicorn with the red and scarlet mane looked at us. "Storing a copy of so many of Calamity's memories was actually the easy part. But the other request…" He turned to Calamity. "I'm sorry, but the Twilight Society simply doesn't have five recollectors to give you."

I had been afraid of that.

Calamity's plan was to divide up the Wonderbolts, incapacitate them through Xenith's paralyzing hoof and Velvet's anesthetic magic, and slap recollectors on them, feeding them his memories. Memories of how and why he left the Enclave. Memories of the good ponies down here. Of his time with me, and the good things we had done.

And to trust in the better nature of ponies.

The problem was, it takes as long to experience the memories in a black opal as it took for the person to live them. And Calamity wanted to feed several days' worth of memories into the Wonderbolts. Keeping them safe and hydrated was a big enough concern, but if we didn't have enough recollectors to trap them all at the same time…

"Fortunately, I have a better way," Life Bloom claimed. "There's a memory spell, one created by Twilight Sparkle herself, which will allow me to cram all those memories into their heads in minutes. It won't be pleasant…" The white unicorn shook his head. "But it will work."

"Uh… no offense, but 'ave ya ever been outside o' Tenpony Tower b'fore?" Calamity asked. "It's rough out there."

Life Bloom tossed his mane. "Yes. I'm a little familiar with the outdoors."

This was a much bigger commitment for the Twilight Society than just some recollectors. "Are you sure? The last person who went on a mission with me didn't come back."

Regina shot a dark glower at nopony in particular.

"You called on us to help. And you were right." Life Bloom gazed at me. "This is us helping."

Reggie stood up. "Okay, then. What are we waitin' fer?"

"Well," Velvet Remedy said softly. "Some of us need to sleep." She did her best not to glance my way. I hadn't moved from where Xenith had dropped me.

"Not long though," I insisted, still not moving. Floor was good. Just give me a pillow. "We need to be moving before the Wonderbolts are."

Reggie looked at the ponies (and zebra) around her. Pyrelight gave a tired little hoot, even though she had spent most of the trip napping against Velvet Remedy's flank.

"Fine," she groused.

My eyelids were getting heavy. But I forced them to stay open. There was one more horseshoe hanging above us, waiting to drop.

"So," Life Bloom asked, "Where are we headed?"

"We will need a place where the Wonderbolts won't be able t' totally own us with their aerial superiority," Reggie pointed out.

Velvet flicked back her styled mane. She'd obviously been to the spa while I was out. She looked perfect. "Well, Manehattan had to have more Stables than just number Twenty-Nine. Do you know of any that are vacant and just laying around?"

"No Stables," Calamity interjected. "Those things are deathtraps, in case y'all ain't noticed. An' even if the Stable itself don't try t' kill us, all the Wonderbolt would 'ave t' do is close the door an' collapse the tunnel. Or do what Li'lpip did with Stable Twenty-Four an' divert a river inta it."

Velvet Remedy cringed, looking at me in surprise.

"They don't even need a river," Reggie added. "These are pegasi. They're really good at making it rain." She shook her head, looking at my pegasus friend. "Best rule out underground entirely."

And here it drops, I thought.

"So, we need someplace that the Wonderbolts can't use their aerial skills against us," Life Bloom said slowly, "And where we can get them split up. But that's outside?"

"Ayep," Calamity said with conviction. "An' Ah got the perfect place…"

Wheee. Look at it fall.

"…Everfree Forest."

* * *

The first golden rays of dawn were pouring across the horizon as the *Sky Bandit* leveled out, flying towards Hope.

"Remind me why you let Calamity make the plans?" Xenith said. She had taken off her zebra stealth cloak and given it to Life Bloom. The buck would definitely have more need of it. And we couldn't risk the Wonderbolts taking out the one pony who could cast the memory spell. Or risk the forest taking him out. Or the fire. Or any of Red Eye's troops who were controlling the fires. Or the Enclave patrols. The consensus was that we were indeed all going to die. But at least it would be an exciting death.

"Well, I'm proud of him," Velvet proclaimed.

"If we are going into the Everfree Forest," Xenith said, pulling an ancient and tattered book from her saddle bags, "then there is something I must tell you."

I looked at the book. The cover was very old leather, warped and cracked. On the front was a large zebra glyph and several smaller ones beneath. The last time I had seen glyphs like that, I was trying to read the Black Book.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, both cautious and curious.

"From my… from Xephyr," our zebra friend said. "Once, this belonged to my grandparents. They rescued it from the Hut of Zecora deep in the Everfree Forest."

Xenith opened the book, pointing at strange glyphs. "You wonder what has caused the Everfree Forest to grow so strange and dangerous, do you not?"

I nodded, remembering Calamity's assertion. The Everfree Forest had never been hit. There was no radiation. No taint. That's why Red Eye sought to turn it into farmland.

"Through this book, I have come to learn the reason," Xenith said cryptically. "And it is not a new one, but a very old one."

"And you're just telling us this now?"

"I received this book while you were playing in the Canterlot Ruins. And it took me some time to read it." Time, I suspected, that babysitting Silver Bell had given her. "And… it was not easy to read. There were things I did not wish to understand."

We all listened intently. Even Calamity's ears were swiveled so he could catch the conversation as best he could.

Something flashed in the distance ahead. On the horizon was the Everfree Forest – still green, still pouring smoke.

"I… believe we may have been wrong about Princess Luna and Nightmare Moon," Xenith admitted, looking down at the book. The zebra was unwilling to meet the gaze of any of the ponies around her. "They were not one and the same."

Velvet cocked her head quizzically. Pyrelight let out a questioning coo.

"Before the war, long before the wasteland… over a thousand years ago, a star fell to our world. And it fell in the Everfree Forest, close to where the Princesses lived."

I knew this story. It had been told to me by Midnight Shower.

"The fallen star's influence warped and twisted everything around it," Xenith claimed. "According to Zecora's writings, even a little exposure was enough to help Luna's inner darkness to take hold and manifest. Only the power of the Elements of Harmony were able to nullify what it had done to her."

The zebra finally looked up. "Forgive me for speaking what may seem ill of your Goddess, but Celestia was never as strong as her sister. When things hurt too much, she would run away."

I glared at Xenith. This had better be going somewhere. I wasn't happy with this sudden and unflattering analysis of the Goddess Celestia.

"She stepped down from the throne in the middle of a war," Xenith reminded us. "And this was not the first time Celestia abandoned something. When forced to banish her little sister to the moon, she fled their castle, leaving their home behind to rot in the Everfree Forest."

Okay, I could see that. And really, who could blame her? The memories that castle must have held… it would be too painful for anypony.

"And she left the Elements of Harmony behind in the castle," Xenith said. "Just… laying there." Xenith stared down at the book, seeming to read from the glyphs. "The Elements of Harmony, the most powerful of all known magics, were left on their pedestal, save one which was hidden, waiting for the spark to reveal it. And in the centuries that passed, the castle crumbled and fell. Moss and vines grew up around the pedestal of the Elements. And they were forgotten, faded into legends and old mare's tales."

"What in tarnation does all that have t' do with the Everfree Forest being all crazy?" Calamity called back impatiently. "Place didn't get so bad until after the war."

Xenith shook her head. "No, winged one. It was getting bad before then. The badness just took time to grow."

"And what caused the badness to grow?" Velvet Remedy asked. "What caused it to get so much worse, if not the war?" It sounded like she was buying this. To me, it was all insane zebra logic.

"From reading this book," Xenith said, "I have come to believe that the infection of the stars was being held at bay for a thousand years. Even during that time, the forest was bad, but it was not as bad as it could be because something in the heart of the forest was hindering it. The Elements of Harmony, even abandoned and dormant, were holding back the bad.

"And then they were removed."

* * *

Again, my eyes caught something glinting in the early rays of dawn. It was ahead of us, out near Everfree Forest. "What is that?"

"That?" Calamity repeated. "The glow, y'mean?"

I nodded. Then, realizing he couldn't see me, called out a yes.

"That there's the Hope Solar Array. Only time o' day when those dishes pick up enough sunlight t' shine is the crack o' dawn." He chuckled. "We'll be passin' right over it b'fore we head inta Everfree, so y'all c'n get a good look."

I nodded again, this time to myself. I was thinking about something Calamity has said about the Enclave. "Okay, everyone. Listen up. We're planning to try to separate the Wonderbolts, but there's a good chance we could get split up ourselves. We need a fallback position."

"Ya thinkin' 'bout the Array?" Calamity asked. "It's close, but it's still quite a few miles from the forest's edge. Long way t' go out in the open, 'specially if yer wounded."

Drat. Think. Think. Okay, backup idea. "I've got it. There's a farm right at the edge of the Everfree Forest. It's supposedly got landmines or ghosts or something, so be careful." Possibly a bad idea. But at least it was a landmark. "Go near, not in." It was either that or Fluttershy's Cottage. And I really didn't want to take Velvet Remedy back there.

The others quickly agreed.

We continued to fly, making small talk as the Everfree Forest drew ominously closer.

I had stopped staring out the window. I didn't really want to see the distance between us and the forest being eaten away. Looking in my companion's eyes, I could see everyone was feeling the same thing I was. A sense of wrongness and inexplicable dread, like our skin was too tight. I'd started feeling it the minute I started to smell the smoke.

This was a bad plan.

But the Wonderbolts were on a clock now. They had to come get us. And my PipLeg was drawing them right to me. With any luck, we shouldn't have to camp out in the forest for more than a few hours.

I watched Life Bloom. He looked out-of-place amongst us. Yet our whole plan rested on his memory spell.

Something clicked in my head. I smacked my forehead with a hoof.

"Let me guess," I said, catching the white unicorn's attention. "You watched my memory orbs first, then memory spelled them into the other ponies in the Twilight Society, didn't you?" And here I'd been so smug thinking I would be able to keep them effectively incapacitated for days.

Life Bloom gave me a pompous smile. "Oh absolutely." Then he frowned. "Except for that last one." Memory Orb Eight. "I was quite convincing that it held nothing any of them would want to see." I started to thank him, but he added, "And I swiftly gouged it from my own memory to mitigate the trauma."

Velvet Remedy snickered. I didn't know whether to be relieved or offended.

"Oh?" Reggie perked up, flying closer. "An' why is that?" It was the first thing she'd said all morning. Yay for it being about my sex life.

"None of your business," Life Bloom replied sharply.

The unicorn buck moved across the passenger wagon and sat next to me. In a soft whisper, he confessed, "I meant no offense. Homage and I have been friends for a long time. And that's not the way I want to think of her."

"Attention, passengers," Calamity called back. "If y'all look out yer windows, ya c'n see the Hope Solar Array on yer right. An' if you look out the front, ya c'n get a real good look at the Everfree Forest. We'll be descendin' t' twenty yards above tree level fer the next part o' our trip…"

I jumped up, shifting to the window. Below and to the right, half a dozen concrete towers rose out of the ground, five of them topped by giant bowls tiled inside with battered and weathered mirrors. A strange fixture rose up in the center of each dish, making them seem a little like flowers, and the array like a giant, artificial garden. One of the dishes had broken off of its tower and toppled face down on the ground next to it, a large crack running up from where it first struck the ground. I floated out my binoculars for a closer look. A wasteland merchant had set up home and shop beneath the overturned dish.

"…Ah suggest coverin' yer muzzles. Air quality is likely t' go downhill pretty dang quick."

* * *

The air grew thick, acrid and hazy. Velvet Remedy passed me a scarf to wrap around my muzzle for protection. She had been thoughtful enough to purchase enough for everyone. The one she gave Xenith was striped with red and gold, and simply looked ridiculous.

We almost made it to the treeline when we heard the cracks of thunder behind us. Turning around, I saw five columns of black smoke, crackling with lightning, shooting up out of the Hope Solar Array.

The Wonderbolts.

Calamity yelled and began to flap his wings as hard as he could, pouring on the speed. I enveloped the *Sky Bandit* in my magic, lightening his load as much as possible.

"They are bad hunters," Xenith complained. "They have no stealth. It is as if they want to be seen."

"They do," Reggie called, catching back up. "If they wanted, they coulda attacked us the moment we flew over that place. Or before."

"They're enjoying the chase," I suggested dourly.

"Or they're drivin' us inta the Everfree Forest on purpose!" Reggie called back.

The haunted farm with all its exploded bits of dirt was passing below us now. Only they didn't look like the disruptions caused by detonated landmines to me. They looked like the work of hellhounds.

I ran to the back window, staring down at the farm as we passed over. In the yard, partially hidden under a tarp, was an Enclave antenna array. It looked just like the one on the rooftop in Old Olneigh. "Oh fuck!"

I looked back up. The streaks of electrified black smoke had taken a sharp turn and were headed straight for us, catching up fast.

Trees rushed beneath us, obscuring the farm. We were over the forest now. Heat rippled up at us, the world becoming an oven. We were in Everfree.

The unnatural sense of dread grew. It was like bugs walking along my bones.

The miles between us and the Wonderbolts closed rapidly as more of the forest shot past beneath us. I could see the orange of flames burning across the ground between the trees and along the shores of a river turned grey with ash.

What the hell? Something was seriously wrong with this picture.

Calamity gave a shout as a cliff side suddenly rose up in front of us. He turned sharply upward, the passenger wagon tilting steeply. We tumbled towards the back, falling towards the glass-less back window and the forest below.

Xenith splayed out her hooves, catching the edges of the rear window as Life Bloom and I toppled against her. The jolt of panic caused my magic to implode. The sudden weight almost pulled Calamity out of the sky.

BLAM!

One of the Wonderbolts fired a shot. A single shot from what sounded like an anti-machine rifle. A hole opened up in the roof of the Sky Bandit, a matching one in the floor.

I heard a strange pop.

Calamity heard it too. With a scream of panic, he pulled us over the edge of the cliff, grassy ground appearing closely beneath us, before kicking the quick release on his harness with a shout of, "Abandon wagon!"

Xenith pulled her legs in and dropped out the back window, followed by Life Bloom and myself. Pyrelight shot out a side window as Velvet Remedy hurled herself out the door.

Xenith hit the grass rolling. I slammed into the forest floor with a graceless thud, small rocks and stiff plants lashing abrasions across my legs and under my chin as I skidded to a halt. If we hadn't been going mostly upward…

Velvet Remedy hadn't even hit the ground when the *Sky Bandit* exploded in a pyrotechnic eruption of wild magic.

* * *

I stumbled to my hooves, looking around for my friends. My mouth tasted like wet copper. My legs spasmed. I had bruised all along my stomach and left side, making it hard to breathe. The world canted, throwing me off balance. I fell back to the ground again.

Scattered around us were burning hunks of twisted metal – the remains of the Sky Bandit. Seeing them drove a pang through my heart. Like we had lost a dear pet or treasured heirloom.

Xenith had landed nearby. She had lost her scarf, but looked otherwise none the worse for having fallen out of a passenger wagon just before the flying bomb lived up to its moniker. The zebra was on her hooves and looking much more steady than I thought I would ever be again. Xenith strode over and helped pull me back to my hooves.

A moment later, Calamity swooped overhead.

"Where are the others?" I called up to him.

"Clearing, just ahead," he shouted down to me before zipping ahead.

I stumbled forward, my legs threatening to give out. My side protesting my every step. Just my luck that we had two healers with us now, and neither of them was with me. I just couldn't win.

Xenith helped guide me forward, pushing through the foliage. The heat was oppressive. The smoke choked my lungs. But the fire hadn't made it to this height yet. I was again struck by the sense that something was seriously amiss.

I paused, looking around, trying to put a hoof on what I was feeling. Nothing.

"Ouch," I whined as a leafy branch Xenith pushed aside came snapping back across my face.

Pushing through the last of the underbrush, I ran into Velvet Remedy's backside. The impact send me falling back onto my flanks, then all the way down as my forelegs gave out.

I stared in front of me between Velvet Remedy's hooves.

A fiercely determined bunny rabbit stared back at me.

The bunny was made of stone.

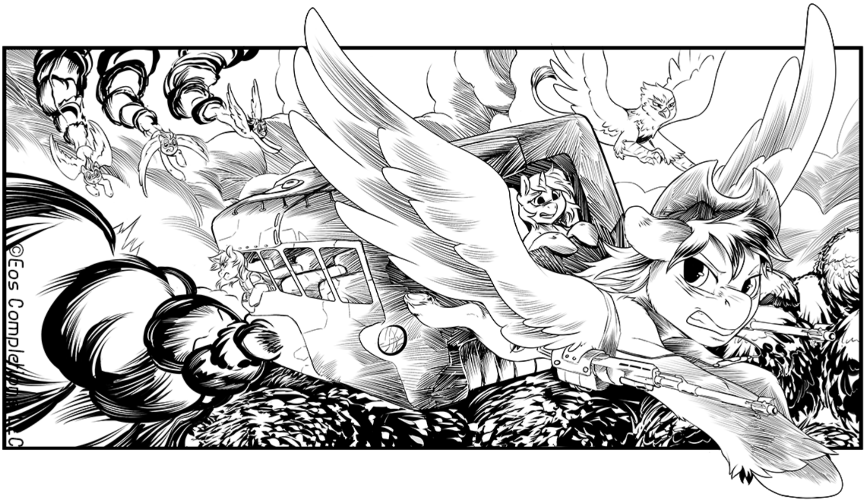
Beyond the stone bunny, the grassy knoll rose up to where a massive weeping willow, twisted and ancient, rose above us. The rough bark of the tree was a strange, buttery yellow. Blue vines wrapped about its gnarled roots. Its drooping pink leaves swayed in a wind I couldn't feel.

The tree was framed by the angry brown sky, choked with smoke. Beyond the tree, the hillside dropped back downward into the fires of Everfree Forest, those flames pushed forward by the dark silhouettes of Red Eye's griffins, their weapons pouring liquid fire across the ground.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Forty-Two

Into Fire and Darkness



"Stay out!! The plants kill!"

"You."

As if in a trance, Velvet Remedy took a step towards the weeping willow with its buttery yellow bark and draping pink leaves.

"It's… you…"

The tree creaked and groaned, an eerie wind blowing through the curtains of hanging pink, rustling them with a mournful whisper. The soft and airy whimper caught my imagination. I could almost believe the wind carried words.

Stay away!

Velvet Remedy moved slowly closer. "It is you, isn't it?" she intoned in a strangled voice. She sounded like she was on the verge of breaking. Or screaming.

I picked myself up off the grass. I looked to my E.F.S. compass, hoping to spot the whereabouts of my friends, but saw nothing. My Eyes-Forward Sparkle had gone down in the crash. Or had I never brought it up? The fatal explosion of the *Sky Bandit* was still ringing in my ears, and I wasn't thinking straight.

Xenith, crouching low, her belly against the grass, crept up to the stone bunny. She reached out a tentative hoof and touched it, her hoof pulling back instantly as if she had reached out to touch molten lava. The fierce stone bunny statue remained a fierce stone bunny statue.

I brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle. It flashed a notice at me: new transmission detected. My eyes fell to the compass, which was glowing entirely red. It was as if the entire forest was hostile.

Behind me, I heard Calamity call out, "Reggie, there you are! Seen Life Bloom?"

"No," Reggie called back, her tone just a little snide. "Ain't he the one with the invisibility cloak?"

Xenith reached out and nudged the statue. It wobbled and fell over. Her eyes widened and she leapt back defensively.

The wind picked up. The rustling through the leaves was a haunting sound. It made the weeping willow sound like it was sobbing.

"How… how can this… be you?" Velvet asked, her voice almost childlike now.

Xenith stood up, approaching the fallen bunny statue. With a strangely sad look on her face, she leaned her head down and picked it up in her teeth, setting it back upright. "Doombunny," she said finally. "Turned to stone by a cockatrice. A worthy end for a worthy opponent."

Only a cockatrice can reverse its own magic. I remembered. The one who stoned Fluttershy's pet had surely died, if only of old age, lifetimes ago. He had stood guard here – unmoving, unwavering stone.

Xenith bowed to Angel. "Doombunny, forever Fluttershy's protector."

The wind picked up, seeming to tear at the tree, the ghostly moans of its branches filled with misery and infinite sorrow.

"I'm here," Life Bloom called out, appearing as he shook the hood back from his head. "Is everypony all right?"

"Yeah, thanks for askin'," snarked the griffin.

The twisted, buttery-yellow tree creaked. The little blue vines shifted about its gnarled roots. Once more the soft, painful howl of the wind seemed to form words:

Get away!

Velvet Remedy took a step closer.

"Get away!" Xenith yelled, charging at Velvet Remedy and striking her with a forehoof hard enough to send her tumbling several yards down the sloped clearing.

Blue vines erupted from the ground in a shower of dirt and grass. Lashes of twisting, sinister ivy flailed after their victim. One of the blue vines brushed Xenith.

Suddenly there was so much blood.

The zebra's body seemed to explode in sick gouts of hot crimson. It was as if each of her stripes had been flensed off her body, leaving gaping wounds of blood and meat.

The vines went after Velvet. Xenith collapsed with a wet thump and a barely audible moan, bleeding to death in a growing pool of dark red.

I had no time to think. I acted instinctively, in desperation drawing on the darkest strings of power. Xenith's blood pulled itself from the grass, dripping upwards, swirling. If I could form a blade, I could form a cast. I spun the blood about her, hardening it into a full-body cast, leaving only her flayed muzzle exposed so that she could breathe.

"…killing joke…" she moaned weakly, "…stay away…" The zebra who had saved Velvet's life slipped into unconsciousness.

Now that the unearthly dread that seemed to permeate the forest had something in my mind to attach to, the fear became palpable. Suffocating.

Scarlet energy enveloped Velvet Remedy, lifting her from the grassy floor as more vines tore up from the ground, seeking to touch. The vines which had attacked Xenith turned their attention towards me.

For just a moment, I froze. I stared at the writhing wave of blue as it whipped across the clearing. I could hear gunshots. Not Calamity. I knew the sound of his battle saddle. He knew better than to try to kill ivy with a bullet. Reggie then. Quick to act and unwilling to hold back.

Jokeblue's a funny name. How'd she get that?

Birth defect, Homage had told me solemnly. *Her mother was hit by killing joke while pregnant. Lucky either of them lived.*

Xenith had seen the threat and understood it. *Sometimes, I feel as if I am an earth pony and that my stripes are really great wounds.*

The plant had somehow taken some random thing Xenith had said and turned it against her. Suddenly, I understood the plant's name. It was a joke – a sick, twisted, malevolent joke. The Everfree Forest was home to a mobile, aggressive, sadistic plant filled with transformation magic.

Vines of blue struck through the air and slithered across the ground, colliding against a field of shimmering light that interposed itself between me and them. Velvet Remedy's shield spell. The vines struck at the shield, unable to penetrate, then burrowed into the ground again.

What have I said? I asked myself in mounting horror. *After Arbu, I thought of myself as a monster. Did I ever say that aloud? Does it matter to killing joke if I did? Oh Celestia, did I ever call myself heartless?*

"Littlepip!" Velvet Remedy screamed. The smoky air went a funny scarlet and filled with sparkles, like I was looking at the world through a red balloon dusted with glitter, and I felt myself lose weight, the grass dropping from beneath my hooves. I looked down in time to see blue ivy burst up through the grass I had just been standing on, grass that was rapidly sinking away from me.

Life Bloom started to run, his horn glowing with scarlet energy as he galloped back into the forest, levitating Velvet Remedy, me and the body of Xenith in front of him. Velvet extended her shield spell in a sphere around us. Pyrelight flew overhead, keeping pace as she weaved between the tree branches that clawed at her.

"Hell of a thing you did back there, Littlepip," Life Bloom called up to me, an indefinable tone in his voice. He jumped a fallen log covered in mounds of blackish-green moss; the ground beneath the log tore open, vines of blue wrapping around it, reaching. "What kind of spell was that?"

"A last resort," I told him as Velvet Remedy wasted no time in mummifying Xenith with healing bandages. Blood poured from the zebra's muzzle. Velvet's eyes were brimming with tears.

More blue vines tore up the ground ahead of us, lashing themselves between trees like a web.

"I got this!" Reggie shouted, shooting forward. She had holstered her pistols and was holding Kage's hellhound-claw knives in her talons.

Panic shot through me. "No!" I cried out. "Don't let them touch you!"

My heart skipped a beat as the Talon griffin drew up short.

"Let me!" I called out, wrapping her brother's weapons in my magic. Reggie nodded, releasing the blades, content to let my magic guide her brother's contribution to our survival. The knives soared through the air at my control, slashing apart the blue vines, clearing the way.

Life Bloom charged past the shredded barrier, jumping over the severed strands of blue ivy. All about us were gnarled, wicked trees and bizarrely-hued plants. Some of the trees were covered in bulging masses of blackish moss which often took on terrifying silhouettes. But I ignored all these, keeping my eyes trained for crawling strings of hateful blue. I had seen killing joke before. There were dead strands of it in Fluttershy's bedroom. This stuff was everywhere in the forest.

Everywhere… but the killing joke was worst, I suspected, back in the clearing we were fleeing from. That place was a trap. And Fluttershy (for I was now convinced that the butter-yellow weeping willow was indeed the Mare of the Ministry of Peace) was its lure. And, more hellishly, its victim. Did Fluttershy ever say something about being tree-like? Or maybe joked about having a bark worse than her bite? Fuck, maybe she just said she wanted to leave.

Dark branches whipped past us. The smoke was getting thicker. Life Bloom coughed, slowing, as a change in the wind brought rolling waves of heat. We were headed towards the fire. I could see the bright flickers of orange between the thick trees in the depth of the forest ahead of us.

"We can't go this way," Reggie called out as I floated Kage's knives back to her. Life Bloom started to change direction.

Three plumes of black cloud shot past us overhead, lightning crackling across the smoky contrails. I watched as the Wonderbolts flew past us, then split apart and started back.

"Aw hell," Calamity moaned, kicking the lever on his battle saddle to switch ammunition.

Least stealthy assassins ever.

Only they weren't assassins, were they? Nopony had called them that except the pony in my head. And she was trying to force them into the wrong frame. No, the Wonderbolts weren't stealthy. But then, when had the Enclave ever been subtle? Stealth was not the Enclave's way.

Everything we had witnessed pointed to the Enclave operating under a single, overriding military philosophy: shock and awe. Overwhelming displays of power and dominance, spectacular and terrifying displays of force and skill that paralyze, demoralize and rout the enemy. The Enclave may have rejected Rainbow Dash, but they were still born out of the fighting force she had molded in her own image. And the Wonderbolts were their greatest and most glorified hunters. Not because they operated with a different methodology than the rest of the Enclave, but because the Enclave revered shock and awe, and the Wonderbolts were the *best* at it.

They were running us to ground, weakening us before the kill, trying to make us panic.

The smoke was like tiny daggers in my eyes. Life Bloom coughed again, a bad rattle in his throat. We couldn't keep running much longer, and we couldn't outrun the Wonderbolts anyway. But the idea of fighting them in this accursed forest seemed more insane every minute.

And the forest wasn't done. Not by a long shot.

The Wonderbolts were being forced low by the smoke, flying at tree-top level. They could trace my tag, but that wouldn't help them track any of the rest of us. And even their armors' targeting spells were virtually worthless in the Everfree Forest. At any distance, my companions just melted into the sea of red lights that was our entire damn environment.

The three Wonderbolts were moving slower and closer now, enough so that I could make out the ponies at the heads of those contrails. They wore modified versions of the Enclave's standard magically-powered armor, their manes flowing out of a trench in the backs of their helmets, their muzzles visible through transparent breathing masks. The rest of the armor had the familiar carapace design, only theirs were a deep blue with lightning-like golden filigree.

Life Bloom poured himself into running, trying to put as much distance between us and the killing joke clearing. The three Wonderbolts *(three? Weren't there five?)* had nearly reached us when dark forms burst from the treetops between us. They were reptilian, like miniature dragons, with leathery wings and wicked claws and strange, beaked heads with red eyes that glinted in malice.

One of them flew right at one of the Wonderbolts. Like it was playing chicken. The elite Enclave flyer didn't flinch, didn't veer off. Neither did the creature. But at the last moment, instead of the two colliding, the thunder cloud contrail stopped, the Wonderbolt falling out of the sky as the creature flew past. Turned to stone.

Cockatrices.

"Jet!" the other two Wonderbolts cried out in unison.

The fiery-maned lead Wonderbolt didn't miss a beat, flipping about in the air and landing on her own contrail, the force causing the smoky cloud to unleash a blast of lightning at the cockatrice. The creature released a wretched, earsplitting squawk and retreated, tendrils of black smoke wafting off its singed scales.

Four more had launched from the trees. I heard Calamity fire his rifles, and another monstrous cry as his target dropped to the ground, thrashing and bloodied. A second rounded back on Calamity only to be knocked away by a flash of emerald and gold. Pyrelight dug her talons into her scaly, dangerous prey and breathed balefire.

I floated a healing potion out of Velvet's saddleboxes and gingerly tried to pour it down Xenith's throat. Her mouth was full of blood, her healing bandages were streaked with blackening crimson where my blood-cocoon had cracked and split.

The leading Wonderbolt shot overhead, her rust-colored mane whipped by the wind. As she passed us, she spun around, flying backwards. Streams of pinkish light tore from her battle saddle, slashing through the trees and underbrush. Several beams of her magical energy struck against Velvet Remedy's shield, causing rippling patterns that reminded me of the sky over Canterlot in the Butterfly Orb.

Velvet's spell collapsed under the strain. But we were once again too deep under tree cover for the pegasus to finish any of us off. With the shield down, we were blanketed by the ominous crackling and heat of the fires ahead.

Reggie had her guns out, firing bullets at two of the cockatrices simultaneously. Her shots finished the one Calamity had wounded, and winged another that was circling towards the Wonderbolts. Reggie swung her other gun towards that cockatrice as well, but she was denied the kill – the monster's head exploded, its blood misting the air. ***BLAM!*** The shot didn't come from any of us, nor any of the Wonderbolts we could see. The Enclave's premier sniper was one of the two Wonderbolts hanging back, out of sight but still very much in the action.

The cockatrice wrestling with Pyrelight twisted and thrashed, trying to turn about so it could look the balefire phoenix in the eyes. Pyrelight's talons scraped against its scales, unable to claw through the monster's tough hide.

Once again, I wished SteelHooves was with us. The former Steel Ranger would have made us a real challenge for the Wonderbolts. And he would have made short work of the killing joke. I suspect he would have enjoyed the opportunity to avenge one of Applejack's closest friends.

Velvet Remedy cast her shield about us again, sweat beading on her brow. The strain was getting to her. Which was exactly what the Wonderbolts wanted. I saw tears streaming down her cheeks that probably weren't from the stinging smoke. "Dammit, we need to stop running and start fighting them," I called over the sounds of fighting and fire. "Divide and save, remember?"

"We need to go back," Velvet Remedy announced.

"What?" Life Bloom called back, echoing my own thoughts. Go back to the field of transformative torture and death?

Velvet turned to me, her tear-soaked eyes filled with determination and pleading in equal measure. "We have to save her!"

Save who? …oh! My eyes widened as I realized just who Velvet Remedy needed to save.

The music of magical energy discharges wrenched my attention upward. As we passed between trees, I caught a glimpse of Calamity pegasus-fighting with the fiery-maned Wonderbolt.

Scorch marks covered Calamity's barding and battle saddle; his left hindleg was curled up under him like it was in pain. But the Enclave elite had yet to consummate a fatal shot. She was an excessively better flyer, swooping rings around him, anticipating his every pitch and yaw. But the forest played havoc with S.A.T.S., and without her armor's targeting spell, she had nowhere near Calamity's caliber of marksmanship. Fortunately for the Wonderbolt, Calamity didn't want to kill her. I knew he was just trying to draw her away from the rest, somewhere where Velvet Remedy or Life Bloom could strike her down with a spell.

A flying ball of thrashing scales and feathers shot through the forest past us. The cockatrice finally managed to pull itself free from Pyrelight, twisting about to turn its petrifying stare into Pyrelight's face.

Pyrelight let out a blast of balefire, melting the creature's eyes away and boiling its brain.

I was trying to pour a second healing potion into Xenith's mouth. Her muzzle had stopped bleeding, scabbing over like a skin of dark crimson leather. Her breathing was ragged, but less so (I thought) than a moment ago.

The ground exploded underneath Life Bloom. Horrifying, pain-soaked memories of SteelHooves' death flashed through my mind as the hellhound erupted from the ground beneath Life Bloom. The hellhound's timing was a fraction off, his helmet slamming into Life Bloom's underbelly, thrusting the unicorn upwards as the hellhound's huge claws slashed at empty air. Life Bloom's magic imploded, dropping us as the pony rolled down the back of the hellhound's armored vest, collapsing on the broken ground behind him, stunned.

I lashed out with my own telekinesis, enveloping Xenith's unconscious form, keeping her from hitting the ground even as I slammed into a nest of fronds on the forest floor. One of the plants slapped me across the eyes. I winced, one eye closed from the pain, and pivoted to look back.

The hellhound blinked in surprise, taking a moment to realize what had gone wrong, then spun around, lifting his claws above the staggered unicorn. Blossoms of red spouted from the hellhound's chest, neck and just below his right eye as Reggie swooped up behind him, firing both of her Calamity-crafted guns as fast as the triggers would allow. Each armor-piercing round punctured the hellhound's armor and hide; only three managing to escape. The hellhound fell.

Xenith's body had come down in the ferns in front of me, but gently thanks to my magic. I didn't know where Velvet Remedy had landed. The crack of the Wonderbolts' sniper split the sky. I hoped the pegasus had been aiming at a cockatrice.

Three more helmeted hellhounds tore themselves up from the ground about ten yards away and began charging towards us, loping on all fours, magical energy rifles strapped to their backs.

I felt the earth tremble beneath me. *Ground might tremble a bit; that's all the warnin' y'all will get before they rend ya apart.* My heart stopped. There was a hellhound right beneath me!

I wasn't dead yet. In the time it took me to think that, I should have been.

Life Bloom shook himself off and began running towards me. I thought I heard Velvet Remedy doing the same. Overhead, Pyrelight had abandoned her kill and was circling through the trees, looking for her favorite unicorn.

Ghosts don't exist. Just landmines.

That was Ditzy Doo's belief about the supposedly haunted farm. In a flash, I remembered the hellhounds' tactic at Maripony. There was a reason the other three hellhounds had revealed themselves so far away.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Stay back! Mines!" I wrapped a levitation field around myself and Xenith.

The three hellhounds stopped their charge, ducking behind trees as they drew their weapons. Life Bloom threw the hood of the zebra cloak over his head, vanishing.

"Littlepip, don't!" Reggie squawked. "If you move, you'll set 'em off!"

Purple light speared my reinforced Canterlot barding, knifing into my flank. The armor dispersed most of the magical energy, but that didn't stop the searing pain. Physical hurt gave way to something deeper as I realized the shot had struck my cutie mark, possibly doing permanent damage. I wailed. I'd never loved my cutie mark, but the idea that I might have just lost it, even on just one of my flanks, was an excruciating cut to my soul.

It was all I could do to keep from stripping off my armor to see what damage the hellhound's shot had done. With a voice filled with emotion, I screamed back at Reggie, "We can't stay here!" We didn't need to hold still. We needed to move very, very fast.

"Jus' keep the two of you weightless," Reggie shouted back as she dove behind a rock, taking cover from incoming hellhound fire. "I'll shoot by and grab you the moment…"

A brilliant blast of light from above snatched everyone's attention, making the smoky sky seem to glow. A rust-colored heap with an orange tail plunged into a nearby tree, trailing smoke.

“Calamity!” Velvet Remedy shrieked. Pyrelight winged over, zeroing in on her voice. A black-scorched, reptilian monster launched itself at Pyrelight from a nearby tree. The balefire phoenix jerked around to see her attacker and immediately turned to stone. The stoned phoenix dropped.

Velvet cried out in despair. Reggie spun in the air, taking swift aim. *Only a cockatrice can reverse its own magic.* “No!” I bellowed, my voice rasping from the smoke. “Don’t kill it! We need it alive!” That last word was disrupted by a fit of coughing.

Three down. We were losing this!

Four down if you counted the little pony in my head who could do nothing more than prance around in misery, crying: *My cutie mark! My cutie mark!*

The cockatrice dipped a wing, circling back through the trees towards us. As it came into sight, the monster was struck by a blast of magic from Velvet Remedy’s horn. It lost control of its body, smacking into a tree branch. The limp body slid from the branch, dropping into a purple fern.

One of the hellhounds kept firing, pinning Reggie as the two others moved to closer trees. Then they opened fire while their companion left cover. The ground squirmed beneath them. A tendril of bright blue wormed out of the forest floor, wrapping itself around the ankle of the last hellhound…

The hellhound was gone, his helmet and rifle dropping into the underbrush. In his place stood a stunned, blinking earth pony mare, her flowing purple mane cascading over her pristine, pearl-white coat. *She has no cutie mark,* my little pony fixated on.

The earth pony let out a wide-eyed *meep.*

The two other hellhounds spun to see the pony who had apparently snuck up behind them. With unthinking aggression, they jumped at her, claws flashing.

With thoughtless instinct, I telekinetically shoved the new pony backwards. The two hellhounds collided almost comically. Seeming to grasp at least some part of her situation, the pony spun around and galloped into the forest, crying.

The two hellhounds picked themselves up and gave chase. More vines of blue tore themselves from the ground, trying to reach them, but the hellhounds were too fleet of foot to be snagged.

I blinked. My mind conjured the image of the hellhound casually commenting to his brothers “Sometimes I wish I was a pony” …or something like that. I could see the joke. It was almost comical. *Ha, ha, we got your family to murder you.* Almost comical, yet still fucking sick.

Birth defect. Killing joke had attacked the mother of Homage’s closet friend while she was pregnant. Probably killing her, and forever scarring the unborn baby. The filthy notion settled into my head that the plants probably did something that caused the mother to die during childbirth, murdering her on what should have been her happiest day and stealing Jokeblue’s mother from her forever.

I realized I hated those plants. Not just feared them. Loathed them with spectacular intensity.

I felt myself yanked away, Reggie’s talons digging at my barding, Xenith in her other clawed grip, being held by her saddle-pouch. The ground shot below me in a blur just before it erupted in a paroxysm of melting magical energy.

Reggie set us down a dozen yards beyond the magical firestorm. Life Bloom appeared almost immediately, his horn glowing as he began to cast medical spells over Xenith. I realized we had completely lost track of the Wonderbolts.

"This… is bad," I moaned. What were they doing? Why weren't they pressing their assault?

"You! Will! Fix! Her!" Velvet Remedy growled, threatening to strangle the barely-conscious cockatrice wrapped in her magic as she thrust it towards a Pyrelight-shaped stone half-imbedded in the forest floor. The cockatrice let out a plaintive squawk. Pyrelight's body slowly became flesh and feathers again, the stone seeming to wash away.

"Don'tcha… let… that… rascal go…"

Calamity dropped out of his tree with a groan. His coat was singed and burned away in places, revealing red and blistered skin. His hat was half-burned, the remains of his mane was still smoldering. My dearest friend was in agony. My nerves cried out in sympathetic pain at the sight. I covered my mouth as I gasped.

"Fucker… weaponized the Buckaneer Blaze…" Calamity complained through gritted teeth as Velvet galloped to him, giving the suspected minefield as little of a berth as she thought safe, the cockatrice hauled behind her. The heat from the fires was oppressive against my own coat and flesh. I couldn't imagine how much it must be aggravating Calamity's wounds.

Gingerly, as if stepping closer to him could cause more pain, I approached Calamity. "Are you…" I stopped before asking Equestria's dumbest question. Instead, I turned to Velvet. "Will he be all right?" The charcoal unicorn was pulling out a super restoration potion. One of our last. Part of me wondered if Xenith might need that even more. A much bigger part of me wanted to beat that part of me up for even asking. I had to trust Velvet and assume that Life Bloom had healing spells that likely put our potions to shame.

Reggie landed next to us. "No sign of our ponyfeathered friends," she commented. "But the fire line's less than a hundred yards ahead, an' Red Eye's griffins are leadin' it. My guess, the Wonderdolts are regroupin'. Forest took out one o' their own before they even engaged us, so they're prob'ly givin' their plan a re-think before tryin' t' fight us where they could draw Red Eye's forces inta the skirmish."

Thank Celestia! We needed the break, even if it was going to be very short-lived. But more than that, we needed to get somewhere safe. The heat was draining our strength almost as much as the fighting. The smoke was burning my eyes and throat, making it hard to breathe. Our struggle against the Wonderbolts had become a three-way battle, and the Everfree Forest was winning.

I really wanted to walk up to them, waving a flag of truce and calling out: Hello? Look, I know we both decided to do this thing in the Everfree Forest – hoping we could use the environment against each other and all that – but we were clearly stupid. Think maybe we could call a time-out until we all get away from the pony-murdering woods?

Obviously, that wasn't going to happen. They didn't need help getting out of the Everfree Forest; all they had to do was fly up. Hell, if they wanted to, they could probably just wait us out. Maybe that's why we didn't see them anymore – they had figured that out themselves.

Fuck.

The ground shimmered beneath us. Velvet Remedy had spread her shield spell over the patch of ground beneath all of us, creating a barrier to protect us from the killing joke. So far, it hadn't tried to attack us again. Life Bloom suggested that the detonation of the mines might have scared it off (although he didn't put it in those terms – something about them finding targets by sensing vibrations and whatnot). My own wild theory was that the plant was slithering away from the approaching fire line. The wind had shifted again, blowing the fires away from us; but the flames looked another ten yards closer, and we could occasionally hear the shouts of Red Eye's forest-burners. Even working against the wind, they'd make Flutter… tree by nightfall.

"Those… those horrible vines," Velvet Remedy whimpered, holding onto me. I was fighting a strong urge to push her back, strip off my armor, and check my flank. But Velvet needed to be held, and I knew that if my cutie mark had been damaged by magical energy, no amount of looking was going to help. Velvet was more important. My friends were more important. And did I really want to know?

"They trapped her up there, h-high on the h-h-hill where she could see what happened to her Equestria. As it was p-poisoned, and destroyed…" Her tear-filled eyes stared into mine. "Pip, they *made her watch!*"

I hugged the kind unicorn who had once been my idol and who had become one of my dearest friends. I couldn't bring myself to mention my own heartbreaking suspicions: that for centuries, the killing joke had used her as bait, luring victims to the clearing and torturing them in front of her. It was intentional cruelty, I was sure of it. How could *plants* be so *vile?*

"They're torturing her! Torturing Fluttershy!" Velvet buried her head against my neck. I held her, not knowing what else to do.

Not far away, a heavily bandaged and medicated Calamity was morbidly instructing Reggie to cut the paws off the hellhound she had killed. "We might be able t' use those claws." The pegasus sent a glance our way. He should be the one holding Velvet, not me. But even touching him would cause him searing pain. The thought pulled my attention to the burning in my own flank. A biting pain that I was doing my best to ignore.

Farther still, Life Bloom was tending to Xenith as best he could. The zebra had yet to regain consciousness. I heard a sad hoot from Pyrelight. I believed the balefire phoenix had come to enjoy being a healer, following in Velvet Remedy's hoofsteps. But unlike Ditzy Doo or SteelHooves, neither Xenith nor Calamity would find their health restored by Pyrelight's radiating on them. Instead, she stood guard over the bound and blindfolded cockatrice. Velvet's prisoner.

"W-we have to save her, Littlepip!" Velvet sobbed, pulling back, shaking me. "We *have* to!"

I fished for something to tell her. I wanted save Fluttershy too. But how? How do you save a tree? If anything, the approaching fires might be a mercy.

"We'll… do whatever we can," I promised her, leaving quiet the caveat of not being able to do anything.

Life Bloom stood up, staring down at what was hardly recognizable as a zebra. "She's in bad shape, but she's stable. And that's more than I would have expected." He looked back at me. “That last resort of yours saved her life.” With a frown, he added, “But she’s in a coma. At best, it’s going to be up to her whether she wakes up.”

“An’ at worst?” Calamity asked.

“At worst…” Life Bloom paused, looking at us, judging how much to say. “I have a spell. Think of it as the opposite of Velvet’s bone re-growing spell.” Several of us nodded. Velvet tensed against me. “I may have to use it to relieve the pressure in her skull… by dissolving part of it.” Almost unnecessarily, he added, “And that is risky.”

Velvet and I silently turned our heads to gaze upon Xenith. Her bandages were completely soaked in blood, the crimson life drying into a blackish shade that made her look like a pony-shaped bruise on the earth. My eyes shifted to Velvet. She knew much better than I did what realities hid behind Life Bloom’s diagnosis. All I knew was that it was very bad, and we might not have Xenith with us much longer. More than ever, I wanted to see her return “home” to Glyphmark. To be with her daughter. To help and aid her tribe. Teaching them medicines and survival skills and…

A memory flittered through my mind. I halted my train of thought, focusing on it, trying to grasp the fragment of the past that had just shaken loose.

Finishing her grisly work, Reggie slammed one of her brother’s knives through the shield and into the ground, the claw-blade sinking up to the hilt. “It should be Kage here, not me.” Before any of us could misconstrue her statement, she looked up, her face etched with sadness. “Kage was better at all this fucked-up wilderness crap.”

Regina’s voice was damp with nostalgia. “Kage actually wanted t’ study this shit. If I’da let him have his way, we’da been on a tour t’ all the most fucked-up parts of Equestria. Splendid Valley, Canterlot, Whitetail Wood… and, of course, the Everfucked Forest.”

The memory seemed to dissolve even as my mind grasped for it. I stomped the ground in frustration; I was sure it had been important.

“Littlepip?” Velvet queried.

Sighing inwardly at the loss, I turned to Reggie. “I… I’m sorry. About Kage.”

The griffin didn’t look at me. “You already said that,” she said crossly.

“Whitetail Wood?” Velvet Remedy asked, picking up on the one name we hadn’t heard before, asking more for Regina’s sake than her own curiosity.

A smirk crawled across Reggie’s beak. “Yeah. Kage used t’ call it the most poisoned place in Equestria.”

“Ah thinph Canforloph erf thaf,” Calamity mumbled. We turned to see our pegasus companion, half-mummified, wind blowing at the trailing strands of gauze, standing in a patch of fronds, the ponified hellhound’s dropped energy rifle clutched between his teeth.

“Whuf?” he asked innocently, taking in our stares. “If worph sumechinn.”

I rolled my eyes. Next to me, Velvet Remedy stifled a laugh.

“Canterlot’s unique,” Reggie told Calamity. “Well, was. Whitetail Wood’s poison is just excessive.” The adolescent griffin gave a slight, smiling shrug that admitted she didn’t really know. “That’s what Kage said, anyway.” The griffin pulled Kage’s knife out of the ground, wiping it off and slipping it back into her belt with its twin. Her eyes turned once again to the corpse of the hellhound she had just dismembered.

“Hey, check this out,” Reggie called, holding the dead hellhound’s helmet in her talons. I slipped away from Velvet. As I approached, I could faintly hear some sort of throbbing hum coming from the helmet.

Crap. When I'd first brought up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle, my PipBuck had notified me of a unfamiliar broadcast. Slipping in my earbloom, I switched to the new frequency. My ear was met with a strange, pulsing hum (throbbing in time to the sound from the helmet). Over the hum were other notes, an odd chorus of artificial sound that cycled in disharmonious patterns. The underlying oscillation reminded me starkly of the Enclave array in Old Olneigh.

Lensflare. *Also top of his class, focused in arcano-tech,* Calamity had said. The Wonderbolts were using magically laced sound to control the hellhounds. This was the other beat of the Wonderbolt's plan. They knew we were expecting them to attack from above, not below.

I told the others what this meant.

"Then we've got t' go back t' that farm," Reggie said, "Take out the transmitter."

Calamity spit out the magical rifle. "Or, y'know, jus' take their helmets off."

"Yes, because then they will be *free-willed,* hyper-aggressive creatures who have just suffered mind-control at the hooves of ponies," Life Bloom pointed out serenely. "Far less dangerous."

"Well, muh plan sucked. Again." Calamity shook his head, staring at the grass beneath the shimmering shield.

I couldn't wait another minute.

"Littlepip," Velvet gasped. "What are you doing?"

Stripping out of my armor to look at my cutie mark. That's what I was doing. And I had never gotten undressed so frantically. I bucked away my armored barding, craning my neck to see my flank.

No.

My coat had burned, my flesh had warped and bubbled, twisting like a corkscrew. The cruel, destructive magical energy had pierced my barding just below my cutie mark, devouring nearly half of the cute little PipBuck on my flank.

"No." I didn't scream. I felt I should have. But it was like a rusty hook had been plunged into my gut and torn back out, eviscerating my emotions. Leaving a gaping black pain that was beyond loss. The feeling wasn't rational. I knew I still had my cutie mark on the other flank. But I couldn't engage that part of my brain.

I heard Velvet Remedy gasp. She sounded strangely distant. Gritting his teeth against his own agony, Calamity stepped towards me. "Li'lpip…" he began, wanting to say whatever the fuck he thought would help. But I swung a hoof at him, making him back away.

"Don't you dare tell me how cutie marks don't matter!" I hissed. Calamity didn't deserve that, but I couldn't push through my own grief enough to care.

The Wasteland had attacked me, body and soul. Carved me up. The taint had twisted me up inside, changed me. I re-grew a *leg!* Then there was my PipLeg and whatever else the pink cloud had done to me. But more that that, the Wasteland had taking my innocence, my naïveté… had sliced away one piece of my soul after another. But this was something it had no right to take. The Wasteland couldn't steal from me what made me special, no matter how insignificant that specialness often seemed – and an attack on my cutie mark felt like exactly that.

Rounding on Velvet, I demanded, "Can you fix this? Tell me you can fix this!"

Velvet swallowed, the sad, shifting look in her eyes betraying the truth. Still, she offered, "Maybe… if we cut away all the damaged flesh…" I willfully ignored those eyes, that look which told me no.

"Do it!" I insisted, virtually thrusting my flank in her face. "Quickly!"

"L-Littlepip… no…" Velvet tried to be reasonable. "Look where we are."

"I don't care!" I snapped, my vision blurring. I realized I was crying. When did that start? "Cut it away!"

Velvet Remedy stood up, her expression shifting to displeased determination. "No!" she barked back sternly. "Not. Here." Turning away, she informed me, "If you want me to cut you up, you're going to have to wait until we are someplace safe." She added, "And at least halfway sanitary."

I wanted to hit her.

I knew it was wrong of me to feel that. But it was as if all the pain and hollowness had shifted, filtered through the lens of her refusal, becoming rage.

"Whoa," Reggie said, seeing the change in my demeanor.

I rounded on Velvet, lifting my forehooves as I opened my muzzle to scream at her, give her one more chance to…

A flash of magic interrupted me. The pain in my flank disappeared. As did the feeling in my legs… and everywhere else. It was like my body had been dissolved away, leaving me a floating spirit. I didn't even feel myself hit the ground, registering my collapse only as a drop in perspective.

"Somepony needs a time out," Life Bloom said, his horn glowing. The anesthetic spell. He'd taught it to Velvet Remedy, hadn't he?

Everyone stared at me. I felt even more angry. Now I wanted to buck even more of them. In the face. (*With radishes,* my little pony suggested bizarrely.)

Calamity looked away, preoccupying himself with strapping the magical energy rifle to his battle saddle.

Velvet Remedy leaned down and nuzzled me gently. "We're sorry, Littlepip. We understand," she gave me an odd but kind look. "I know how long you fought to get your cutie mark. To not be upset would be… damaged."

She laid back down next to me. Not touching, but giving me the support of her proximity whether I wanted it or not. My rage and hurt didn't fade. But after a few deep breaths, the focus of my anger began to trickle away from Velvet Remedy and more towards myself. The world became blurrier until it was nothing by watery shapes.

I cried onto Velvet Remedy's floor-shield, the tears crackling softly as they fell.

* * *

"Now then," Life Bloom suggested calmly, having poured healing spells into Xenith and Calamity. My pegasus friend was moving without pain again. Xenith hadn't stirred. "Let's see what we can do about saving this one."

My anger had dissolved back into that wounded, hollow feeling. The transition was enough to allow the more rational part of my head to take over. Yes, my cutie mark was gone. Well, gone-ish. But I had never understood it or cared for it. It was, after all, not much better than a cutie mark of a cutie mark. And I still had its twin.

I felt ashamed. Reggie was dealing with the loss of a real twin, real family, better than I was dealing with the loss of a stupid picture on my flank.

I also felt woosy, lightheaded. I was dehydrated. My vision was still blurry, even though I had stopped crying – I couldn't move my forelegs to wipe my eyes. The heat of the burning forest was drying my tears, turning them hot and extra salty. I coughed on the smoke, my throat feeling raw. I wondered how close the flames were now. I couldn't get up to see, but the crackling was louder than ever; it sounded closer. Everfree Forest looked brighter than before, bathed in an unhealthy orange glow.

(And, of course, there was a tiny, lingering embarrassment over having laid helpless as Velvet Remedy re-dressed me. She and Calamity weren't about to let me lay around in the Everfree Forest unprotected. It was not enough for them that I had been armor-adjacent.)

The white pony with the red and scarlet mane turned and pointed his glowing horn back towards the forest. A reddish glow formed somewhere deeper into the woods, beyond where my ground-level perspective allowed me to see. The glow intensified as it drew closer.

Wrapped in the sparkling red sheath of Life Bloom's magic, the stone statue of a pegasus in Wonderbolt armor floated over the ferns and set down on the shielded ground before us.

Jet, they had called her.

"Daymn," Calamity whispered with a resurgence of hope. Maybe his plan wasn't a total wash after all.

Velvet Remedy levitated the bound cockatrice over. "Now listen close," she whispered, her voice somehow both kind and menacing. "You restore this pony and you promise not to go around turning innocent creatures to stone, and we'll let you go." Unspoken promises of what would happen should the cockatrice refuse dripped from the offer.

Life Bloom lifted a questioning eyebrow, mouthing to the others: *let it go?* I wanted to chuckle, or at least to nod. Life Bloom didn't know our Velvet.

The cockatrice complied. (At least, regarding the first part.) The grey, hard lifelessness of stone washed away, leaving the ebony-coated, violet-maned, blue-armored pegasus blinking in bewilderment. Before the mare could drink in the befuddling change in her environment, Life Bloom stepped forward, lowering his horn towards the Wonderbolt's helmet, lifting up her visor and touching his horn to her forehead.

There was a sparkling red flash. The Wonderbolt's eyes widened as Calamity's memories flooded into her.

Somewhere nearby, I heard shouts. Red Eye's fire brigade was closing on our position.

"Daymn," Calamity muttered again, this time with disgust.

Life Bloom was locked in concentration, casting into the ebony Wonderbolt's head. Velvet Remedy released the cockatrice, which immediately fled with an indignant squawk, its leathery wings propelling it away from the oncoming wall of fire.

Regina took to the air, only to drop back to the ground almost instantly after clearing the treetops. "uh, Pipsqueak?"

"Littlepip," I corrected, my name strangely slurred from a muzzle where I couldn't feel my tongue.

"That tag thing the Wonderdolts are followin' you with? Gotta reckon they got the tags fer each other, right?" I didn't think I liked where Reggie's too-casual speculation was headed. "Whatcha bet when their girl down there got un-stonified, they all got some sort of signal?"

Oh fuck.

Both Red Eye's forces and the Wonderbolts were going to come down on this spot in minutes! We needed to move. *I* needed to move! Lifting a hoof would be a good start.

The glow around Life Bloom's horn faded, the memory spell complete. Life Bloom staggered back, wiping sweat from his forehead. "And Twilight Sparkle could do that at least five times in one day?" he asked weakly.

Jet stood, blinking, shaking herself off. The ebony Wonderbolt stared at us, her eyes wide, her face openly displaying her internal conflict, expressions of confusion, dismay and revulsion chasing each other across her features (the few we could really see).

The Wonderbolt mare spread her wings and, without a word, fled.

"Well shucks," Calamity said, staring at the empty space Jet had filled moments ago. "Ah reckon Ah was bein' a silly pony t' hope she'd jump t' join our side."

"She didn't attack us," I pointed out. "That's something."

"Great. Somebody grab your mastermind an' your zebra, and let's get outta here," Reggie growled, checking the load on her guns. She launched herself into the air, clearing the treetops and nearly colliding with one of the four pegasus-tipped thundercloud contrails that ripped the sky overhead. Too late.

The rust-maned Wonderbolt cartwheeled in the air as she flew past Regina, firing a spray of pinkish light that bombarded Regina, the light seeming to explode on contact with the griffin. Regina crashed back into a treetop.

I found myself engulfed in a magical field the color of Velvet Remedy's nightingale cutie mark. *If I lose both my cutie marks,* the pony in my head mused worthlessly, *will my magic change color?* Velvet Remedy floated me off the ground, her shielding spell dissipating, and began to run. Life Bloom broke into a gallop behind her, floating Xenith ahead of him. He quickly overtook us, a faster runner than Velvet, and floated Xenith's seemingly lifeless body carefully onto Velvet's back as he passed. I saw his red and scarlet tail running in front of us for just a moment, streaming out from beneath his cloak. Then he vanished.

I twitched. Life Bloom's spell was fading; I was beginning to feel my body again. I swung my PipLeg, my movements less like a pony and more like a ragdoll (*the sort that would come with its own notepad and quill,* a little voice told me). Fumbling, I marked on my PipLeg's automap where Reggie had fallen. We'd come back for her, I swore, before the day was out. But right now, we were just trying to get some distance between us and the fire.

A cloaked figure appeared amongst the trees ahead of us. At first, all I saw was the zebra stealth cloak, and I wondered why Life Bloom had stopped and turned. But the shape under the cloak was all wrong. My heart skipped a beat.

The figure rose up, the hood of the cloak falling back to reveal the helmeted head of a white-furred hellhound. He raised his magical-energy cannon towards us, aiming down the sight with one of his alien-looking red eyes (a sure sign of albinism – be smart!), and touched the trigger.

The albino hellhound's shot went wild – a crackling ball of unstable energy that arched upwards maybe a dozen yards before exploding into an omni-directional spray of magical flak – as the still-invisible Life Bloom barreled into him, horn first. Even a full gallop, Life Bloom didn't have the strength to penetrate the toughened hide beneath the hellhound's fur, but his momentum sent the monster flying backwards, tumbling and sprawling.

Life Bloom hadn't ended the charge particularly gracefully either. He was on his back, hood down and cloak bunched up around his neck, kicking his legs in the air in an embarrassing and almost perverse position.

The Wonderbolts flew back overhead, splitting off in different directions. The Wonderbolt mare with the rust-colored mane shot straight up.

Life Bloom rolled over, struggling to get to his hooves, getting tripped up by the cloak. The albino hellhound was faster, flipping back onto his feet and diving for where his magical flak cannon fell.

I couldn't move properly, but I was far from helpless. Little Macintosh floated out in front of me as I took aim at the hellhound through the trusty revolver's scope. Without S.A.T.S., hitting an erratically moving target was damn hard, but I wasn't fresh out of the Stable anymore. I had lots of practice.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

I missed the hellhound, two of my shots going completely wild. The third struck his magical weapon just as he was drawing it up. The hellhound was either acting faster than he was thinking, or he hadn't noticed the hit. He aimed the cannon at Velvet Remedy, pulling the trigger.

The gun began to crackle, engulfed in a sheath of unstable energy. The hellhound hurled it as far from himself as he could, the magical flak cannon landing in a grove of grotesquely moss-covered trees and purple ferns. It cartwheeled, bouncing through the fronds…

KRACCCK-PRUW!!!

Flashing blades of solid magic sliced past me. One struck through Velvet's mane, sending tufts of white flying, but blind luck and the forest shielded us. The explosion shredded several trees but mercifully claimed no pony victims.

"Break!" shouted Calamity. "Scatter!"

Velvet canted, shifting her gallop in a new direction, drawing me away from the others. I looked back, glimpsing Life Bloom, who had finally made it back onto his hooves, sprinting in the opposite direction.

Something blue shot down out of the sky. The forest exploded.

The shockwave slammed into me, making my insides feel like jelly as it picked Velvet and Xenith up off the ground and hurled us all brutally forward. A ring of crackling, electrified black smoke followed the shockwave, as did the roar emanating from the mushroom-like cloud that rose up behind us.

My whole body felt bruised even before I slammed into the ground. I thanked the Goddesses that Velvet had put my reinforced Canterlot Police Barding back on.

The Wonderbolt shot out of the mushroom cloud, opening fire on her downed opponents, The air between us filled with beams of frantic pinkish light. Biting back a moan, I rolled behind the splintered remains of one of the flak-shredded trees, taking cover.

As the Wonderbolt shot past us, I realized to my dismay that the explosion hadn't even been a weapon. It was an *aerial maneuver.* But… how? I knew that pegasi and possibly even earth ponies had their own inherent magic. *(Well, duh! Have you* met *Pinkie Pie?)* Pegasi could walk on and manipulate clouds, after all. But this was beyond the pale. I was forced to quickly reassess what "the best at shock and awe" might actually mean.

I pushed myself up, coughing wretchedly. My coughs were wet and hot and tasted like copper. I ran my PipLeg over my muzzle and found myself looking at a screen smeared in blood.

"Not good."

Shakily, I got onto my hooves and limped towards the crumpled mess of Xenith. Her scabs had all broken and she was bleeding horrifically again. I drew on the Black Book's spell one last time in a desperate bid to quell the blood loss.

I stared into the blood-streaked screen of my PipLeg, using the inventory sorting spell to find the last healing potion I had in my saddlebags. As I fed it to Xenith, I tried to spot Velvet Remedy. Rarity's battle dress should have protected her, she should still be alive.

Life Bloom, I realized, had been much closer to the explosion. I was certain that Velvet was searching for him. Dreadfully, my mind imagined Velvet, stumbling and hurt, walking right past the cloak-shrouded body of Life Bloom as the unicorn bled out.

Hating my mind, I shook off the horrific image. I wasn't going to let pain or despair stop me any more than I was going to let the Everfree Forest or the Wonderbolts win. I had a destiny. I had a mission. I had friends to help and unicorns to save and a sky to clear. No more self-pity. No more misery. Let the Wasteland and the Enclave throw whatever the fuck they wanted to at me. I'd made it this far. I'd survived Fillydelphia and Canterlot, and that was before I even knew my purpose. How was it going to stop me now? I was going to…

(Be awesome!)

…be awesome. Yes. That worked.

The rational part of my mind told me that if one of the Wonderbolts could do that and fly away, they could probably all do that. And they could just keep doing that until they had torn us all to bloody ribbons, flattening the Everfree Forest in the process if necessary.

I told the rational part of my brain to shut the hell up.

The next thing that came shooting down out of the sky was going to get a bullet through its visor before it could pull off any fancy-schmancy aerial tricks, courtesy of Little Macintosh.

Soon as I spotted where Applejack's old revolver had fallen.

I looked up, trying to spot dive-bombing pegasi through the large gap in the foliage created by the… whatever the hell that explosion was. Instead, I saw Calamity once again pegasus-fighting with a Wonderbolt. This time, a gunmetal grey buck with an electric sea-green mane and what looked like an anti-machine rifle built into his battle saddle. Their sniper.

If there was one good thing about being this close to the fire, it was that the thick smoke rendered that bastard's advantage useless. He was still a better flier than Calamity, and at least damn near as good a shot.

A familiar blast of sparkling red energy struck out of the forest, enveloping the gunmetal grey Wonderbolt, turning him instantly from a graceful aerial fighter to a pony-shaped sack of fail. Calamity stopped, hovering as he watched the other buck drop into the forest, paralyzed by the anesthetic spell.

That spell came from Life Bloom! That meant he was okay, and we had now taken down two of the Wonderbolts. I felt the urge to cry out in elation.

Instead, I coughed up more blood. Stumbling forward, I began to search for my friends. My hoof bumped into something solid and metal. Little Macintosh! Thank you, Luna. It felt like things were really beginning to turn around.

I found Velvet Remedy. She was fighting to save the life of the albino hellhound with the zebra cloak. Of course she was.

The hellhound had been caught in the blast, the Wonderbolts apparently not caring if they destroyed their tools. His leg had been blown off, his body ending in bloody tatters of shredded meat and broken bone inches above where his left knee should have been. The hellhound was whimpering gruelingly, his body shaking in shock, the grass beneath him wet with blood.

When I came upon them, Velvet Remedy was using a stick and a length of old surgical tubing to craft a tourniquet.

"She… does this a lot?" Life Bloom whispered, appearing at my side, surprised by Velvet's aid to the enemy.

"All the time," I replied, shaking my head. Part of me wanted to be mad at her. We had wounded of our own. But what good would it do? Velvet couldn't see a creature suffering and not try to help. It was a virtue, her virtue… even if it was occasionally damn frustrating.

"Life Bloom, Xenith… please…" I pointed in the direction of my zebra friend and the Twilight Society unicorn trotted quickly away. Life Boom was filthy, his cloak and coat smeared with dirt and blood, but he appeared surprisingly unscathed from the explosion.

Calamity flew up above me, looking around. "Hey, Li'lpip! Ya see where Gutshot fell to?" I shook my head. Gutshot? So, their sniper was the pegasus who took second place to Calamity in the Best Young Sharpshooter competition four years running. I should have guessed.

"Well shoot. Wanna get him t' Life Bloom b'fore that spell wears off. Boy woulda had me if he wasn't so insistant on shootin' me."

Come again? I gave him a confused look.

"Gutshot coulda taken me down a dozen times over with his fancy flyin'. But unlike Skydive, he was so fixated on gettin' the best o' me with a bullet, he all but defeated 'imself."

I frowned as Calamity flew off, continuing his search. That didn't sound like the sort of rivalry that was going to be fixed with a memory spell. I had dragged myself back to Xenith and (the miraculously healthy) Life Bloom. When I reached them, I kneeled before my comatose friend. Life Bloom had stopped the bleeding and was casting a replenishment spell.

"How… how bad?"

"We really need to get this girl out of the battle zone," Life Bloom frowned. "I'm using nearly every spell I have just to keep her from slipping away. All this extra trauma isn't helping." The unicorn frowned, shaking his head. "If she doesn't come to on her own soon, Velvet's going to have to make the call." It took me a moment to realize he was referring to the magical operation. Dissolving part of Xenith's skull to ease the pressure on her swelling brain. Velvet Remedy was the only one of us who knew enough about medicine to make an informed decision.

Do we risk Xenith's life by having Life Bloom cast the spell? Or do we risk it by telling him not to?

"How'd you survive that explosion?" I asked, changing the subject to something I could better handle.

"I took cover," the unicorn explained. "Dove into the hole that hellhound came out of."

One of the Wonderbolts, a cloud-white mare with a flaming orange mane, flew overhead. I recognized her as Skydive, the one who had bucked her own contrail and had felled Calamity with her lethal Buckaneer Blaze. Always front and center of their formations, I suspected she was their leader. She stopped, hovering, then shot up into the air disappearing into the smoke directly above Xenith's huddled form.

No.

"Run!" I shouted, wrapping the bleeding, butchered zebra in my magic, my brain ignoring that my body was in no condition to gallop.

A rust-colored blur shot out of the sky. Calamity had me in his hooves, racing between the trees with strands of gauze flapping in the wind behind him. A moment later, the world behind us exploded in a fiery mushroom cloud. The smoky ring of electrified stormclouds struck us, lightning sizzling across my body, making me convulse. My magic imploded, dropping Xenith once again into the forest at bone-crunching speed. (Goddesses, at this rate, we were going to kill her!) Calamity and I crashed into a large patch of purple ferns with long-stalked, bulb-headed plants growing out of them. We tore roughly through he plants, fronds lashing at us like whips, until we slid to a stop, Calamity laying half on top of me.

I coughed, blood spraying on the ferns and grass. My body felt torn up inside. My E.F.S. was sending me severe internal injury warnings.

The plant stalks' bulbs, each the size of a stallion's head, languidly swiveled down towards us. A magical barrier washed over us a split-second before those bulbs broke open, hosing us with clouds of dusty plant matter. Spores. I turned to see Velvet Remedy charging towards us, her horn glowing, her shield having saved us from Goddesses-knew what horror.

The fiery-maned Wonderbolt burst out of her explosion, her contrail on fire as she shot towards Velvet Remedy. The bulb-headed plants rotated towards the oncoming unicorn. Their bulbs broke open again and spewed.

Velvet tossed up another shield, sliding to a graceful stop. Wonderment splashed over me as I realized just how fast she had gotten with casting that spell. And this was the first time I had seen her manifest two shields at once.

"Muh mare's got skills," Calamity grinned, echoing my thoughts as he lay half on top of me, recovering from the brief electrocution. I pushed him off, looking about, hoping that Xenith had either landed far from the spraying plants or that Velvet's spell had protected her too.

The Wonderbolt shot over Velvet, her contrail causing trees to burst into flames in her wake, and soared over us, setting the bulb-headed plants on fire. The burning plants seamed to scream, writhing and collapsing, the fire spreading to the ferns all around us.

Something plummeted down from the sky.

It wasn't a dive-bombing Wonderbolt. It was more like some sort of missile – a mechanical device sheathed in red-painted metal that embedded itself in the ground with a mighty WHUMP.

Calamity grabbed me again, flying us out of the bed of ferns being slowly consumed by fire. He coughed as he inhaled the acrid black smoke bellowing up from them, and the little pony in my head recalled earlier fears of dangers in the Everfree smoke. As we landed again, I began to heave, coughing up blood in large, wet splotches.

"Dammit, Li'lpip!" Calamity scolded, fishing out a healing potion. I downed the potion, feeling the warmth of its magic spread through me. There was a slight hint of peaches and alcohol, telling me that Calamity had purchased this bottle from Candi in New Appleloosa. As the potion started to work, I quickly felt less gruesome inside.

The three remaining Wonderbolts flew up, staring down at the strange intruder into our battle.

A plate on the missile slid open, a strange-looking turret with a diamond embedded in the barrel slid out. It turned, aiming up at a sky thick with smoke.

Velvet Remedy screamed.

I threw her a questioning scowl, assuming that something about the mysterious missile had set her off, and did a double-take of horror. The tree next to her had been set ablaze by the Wonderbolt's fire-contrail, licking flames spreading through its branches, burning leaves falling about her. But that wasn't what had horrified her. The tree was one of those wrapped in grotesque, bulging patches of blackish moss. And one of those patches, roughly the size and vaguely the shape of a pony, was ripping itself off of the tree.

The moss-creature fell to all fours, looking even more pony-like. But the way it moved, twisted and boneless, was like something from a nightmare.

At first, I hoped it was just fleeing the fire. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw more dark, misshapen forms pulling themselves from the trees.

Calamity drew the magical energy rifle and fired several bursts into the moss-creature as it lumbered towards Velvet Remedy. The creature incinerated colorfully.

A clicking whine sounded from the missile, and the turret's diamond began to glow, projecting the image of a huge, cybernetic red eye against the smoke. The eye jerked back and forth, seeming to watch us. We all heard Red Eye's voice.

"Congratulations, Wonderbolts, on an excellent strategy," Red Eye said amiably.

"Oh yeah," one of the Wonderbolt bucks deadpanned, "This ain't supervillain-y at all."

"Red Eye to the rescue?" Calamity whispered to me as a burning leaf drifted past us.

Red Eye continued, his voice never straying from a pleasant, conversational tone. As if we were sharing tales over tea and apple slices. "Unfortunately, too good. I'm bored. And frankly, I have my own plans for the little unicorn you are tracking…"

Fuck me.

"…So I decided to even up the playing field a bit." The missile let out a pulse and my E.F.S. alerted me that the hellhound-control broadcast had just been silenced.

The Wonderbolts stared from the red eye in the sky to the missile and back. The fiery-maned, cloud-white mare shouted, "Jet's not here. Situation's changed. Tactical retreat." The Wonderbolts began to fly upwards.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that if I were you," Red Eye said calmly, the Wonderbolts stopping as if something had them by the tails. "First rule, no flying."

"First rule?" a Wonderbolt buck asked.

"Fuck that," the fiery-maned mare retorted before flapping her wings and shooting up through the smoke, right through the projected red eye, in a burst of speed.

The other Wonderbolts waited a heartbeat. The moss-monsters began to move towards us with twisted, jerking steps.

The Wonderbolt's leading mare plunged back down through the smoke, driven downward by a dark green alicorn who slammed her into the ground hard enough to knock her unconscious and nearly kill her.

Calamity spun, firing on a moss-monster that was getting alarmingly close. It turned to ash in a flash of magical energy.

More green alicorns few down through the smoke, landing in the forest around us. A shimmering red alicorn shield swept overhead, forming between them, trapping us and the Wonderbolts inside. I suddenly felt I was back in The Pit.

"Ah'm not sensin' a whole lot o' rescue in this rescue," Calamity muttered as he checked the load on the magical-energy rifle. The moss-monsters were unlikely to be as vulnerable to bullets.

Something fluttered against my thoughts like a bat. I turned about to see the one alicorn inside the shield, standing over the fallen body of the Wonderbolt's leader, her eyes burrowing into me.

I felt her in my mind. The intrusion was intimate and unwanted.

You are the one Red Eye wants. Her voice was royal and powerful in my head.

Well, I thought back, *he can't have me.*

We shall see. In an instant, her voice was joined by a dozen others, all whispering in my head at once, flooding my thoughts with their voices.

They were all green. The daughters of Gestalt and Mosaic. As the tide of voices mounted into a tsunami, I wondered if the green's natural telepathy made them more stable, more capable of coping with the loss of their Trixie-Goddess… or less.

I fought to hear myself think. What were they doing? And why were they helping Red Eye? What did the alicorns get out of this? What had he promised them?

Males, the voices responded, reading my thoughts. ***Continuation. Survival. Mates!***

Oh. Clever stallion.

The sea of voices increased. Not just dozens. Scores. Red Eye had coaxed almost half of the green alicorns to serve him in exchange for the male alicorns he would create as their new God. And most of them were here in Everfree Forest. At the Cathedral.

I heard Calamity fire the magical rifle again, but I wasn't seeing him. I was getting flashes of what they were seeing. Muddled glimpses inside the stone walls of Red Eye's fortress, all overlapping, too chaotic to make sense of.

Velvet Remedy had moved up to us. She'd said something about Xenith, but I didn't catch it. The minds of the alicorns pressing against my brain were making it hard to keep connected with the real world in front of me.

Above us, the Wonderbolts were circling the top of the shield, flying faster and faster, their thundercloud contrails spinning spirals behind them as they drew closer with each pass. Above them, Red Eye's red eye shifted back and forth across the clouds of smoke, watching the show.

The flood of other-thought was becoming overwhelming.

Then, suddenly, it focused.

FLOAT OUT YOUR GUN, the voices demanded in unison.

I found myself levitating Little Macintosh. It was such a simple request, after all. And I really wanted to. The voices in my head told me so.

AIM AT THE UNICORN.

Okay… What? Wait. Velvet? No!

But the pressure on my mind was like a physical force. The weight of several dozen alicorns pushed me to swing the barrel of Little Macintosh towards Velvet.

AIM AT THE UNICORN.

I fought back, the revolver shaking in the air as I tried to assert my own will. But the alicorns were determined to consume my will, submerge it in their own until I was cut off from it completely. In my head, my little pony was fighting a losing battle as dozens of little alicorns swarmed her, piling up around her like a mountain.

Little Macintosh swiveled in the air, its barrel pointed at Velvet Remedy's skull.

"Littlepip?" Velvet Remedy asked timidly, finally seeing the gun floating in a sheath of my magic, shrinking back from Little Macintosh. "Why are you…?"

KILL THE UNICORN.

Overhead, the Wonderbolts suddenly angled towards each other. They expertly missed colliding in a threesome, their contrails crossing at a focal point perfectly centered above the missile, releasing a star-shaped explosion of electrical energy.

Red Eye's projector went dead, his eye disappearing from the sky. At the same moment, my Eyes-Forward Sparkle collapsed, my PipLeg's spell matrix crashing.

Be awesome!

KILL THE UNICORN.

My little pony was buried under a rising hill of little alicorns, crushing her, stealing her breath. But they weren't the only thoughts pressing on my mind.

Be strong! Be unwavering! Be smart!

This wasn't the first time I had felt the influence of outside entities. The Black Book. The statuettes. But whether those outside thoughts bore good intentions or ill, I had never let them control me. Influence, yes. But I never lost myself to them.

KILL THE UNICORN!

The mountain of little alicorns filling my head blew apart, their influences scattering as my little mental pony gave them all a mighty buck.

Nope! I pulled Little Macintosh away from Velvet Remedy, firing instead at the alicorn inside the shield. *Not gonna happen!*

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

The alicorn was dead by the second shot, but I didn't stop until I had completely unloaded the weapon. Turns out, if you pour enough bullets into a creature's brain, it really is almost like decapitation.

Beside me, Velvet Remedy looked shocked. She was trembling… no, wait, that was me. The alicorns minds were still in my head, but they were quieter now. One by one, they slipped away from me. The very last left a stray thought behind.

Tell Red Eye she passed.

The intensity of my trembling jumped an order of magnitude, my mind filled with violation, pain and rage. Lowering my head, spitting at the ground, I let out a primal scream.

* * *

Movement above caught my eye.

Velvet had found Xenith near the edge of the shield, and the three of us had made our way to her before I had buckled from heat exhaustion. The others weren't doing much better. Velvet had given me the last of her water after pouring most of it gently into Xenith's mouth. I had taken it without argument, but I was regretting it now.

I looked up to see Reggie pounding against the alicorn shield. She'd recovered, but was trapped outside.

"Reggie, yer okay!" Calamity shouted up to her, his voice cracked and rasping. Most of the trees inside the shield were burning now. The Wonderbolts had rebreathers in their armor, but we were dying of smoke inhalation.

"Of course," she called back. "I carry plenty of healing potions. I'm not an idiot!" Yeah. What kind of morons would wander the Wasteland without each having their own load of them?

Before the griffin could say anything else that made me question my intelligence, I directed her to start killing the statuesque alicorns sitting just outside the shield.

"An' be careful," Calamity warned between fits of coughing. "When the shield goes down… this fire…" He collapsed in a hacking fit that sounded like he was trying to get rid of his lungs through his muzzle. Reggie nodded sagely and flew off.

Life Bloom had crept over to the unconscious leader of the Wonderbolts, shoving the still-bleeding corpse of the alicorn off of her.

WHUMP! The blue-armored form of a Wonderbolt dropped out of the curling smoke in front of us. I recognized her rust-colored mane and red-coated snout – the Wonderbolts' heavy gunner. I swung Little Macintosh towards her, trying to focus through the smoke stinging my eyes, trying to remember if I had reloaded or not.

"Dammit, this is just too easy," she said, casually batting Little Macintosh out of my telekinetic grasp with her wing.

Dark, shifting shapes moved out of the smoke, shambling towards her. "Look out," Calamity rasped as the moss-monsters closed in on the Wonderbolt.

The Wonderbolts' heavy gunner turned, spraying pink energy across the black moss creatures, dissolving two of them in flashes of pink ash. The third was huge, a giant shadow towering over her. A splash of icy horror trickled down my spine as I realized the moss-monster was vaguely manticore-shaped. These… these plant-things had once been living beasts, many of them ponies. This black moss infected them somehow. Consumed them. Became them.

The Wonderbolt dodged as the moss-monster lashed out at her with what had once been a manticore's scorpion-like tail. It was aiming for her head, trying to get inside the narrow split in her helmet which her mane flowed through.

The rust-maned mare opened fire, spraying the moss-manticore with pink light. Parts of the creature dissolved in flashes of ash, but this one wouldn't die so easily. The moss-manticore slashed out with startling alacrity, raking claw-like appendages against her armor, trying to rip off her visor and get at her eyes.

The Wonderbolt staggered, blocking the blows with her wings, keeping the creature off of her face. She fired again, a few beams of pink lancing out before her weapons ran dry.

The moss-manticore exploded into green flame.

The Wonderbolt stumbled back, turned towards us, and was hit by Velvet Remedy's anesthetic spell before she could speak, much less reload. She collapsed in front of the burning monster. A gaping pit opened in the black moss where the manticore's mouth should be, and it screamed silently, green fire burning up through the hole to consume its mockery of a head.

Pyrelight landed on Velvet Remedy's head, looking particularly proud of herself.

"Sorry about that," Velvet apologized to the downed pegasus.

Beyond us, Life Bloom was getting back to his hooves. He wobbled slightly, the toll taken by the memory spell mixing with the heat and the smoke. The Twilight Society unicorn stumbled away from the Wonderbolt and towards a patch of ferns, looking like he was about to pass out.

A bulb-headed stalk rose up out of the ferns as he reached them, spraying its cloud of spores directly into the unicorn's face.

I cried out in alarm, the scream tearing at my throat, but the sound was lost in the sudden conflagration as the alicorn shield dropped and the fires started by Skydive's flaming contrail exploded outward to greet the fresher air.

* * *

Night was falling in the Everfree Forest. We had managed to put at least a mile or two between ourselves and the fires. There was a hellish orange glow in the broiling sky above. The world below became all shadows against deeper darkness. Only the light of our horns, Velvet Remedy's and mine, were truly lighting our way.

Life Bloom doubled over again, retching. Bile and filth poured out of his mouth and nose. He had cast a purging spell on himself, trying to get rid of all the spores before they could settle in and begin to slowly kill him. The effects were extremely unpleasant and debilitating, but still far better than the alternative.

We pushed through the forest. I floated Xenith next to me. Velvet Remedy was levitating the wounded albino hellhound. The monster had passed out, and Velvet had simply insisted, "If we leave him, he'll burn alive."

Calamity had insisted he be bound, and Velvet had at least relented on that. I was unsure how much good bindings would do on a huge monster with long, armor-slicing claws.

The hellhound groaned. Xenith was utterly silent.

We had managed to pull off Calamity's plan with three of the Wonderbolts: Jet, Skydive and Strafewise, their heavy gunner. None of them had joined up with us, although Strafewise at least admitted it was "a lot to take in and a lot to think about" before she and Skydive left us. If there was a truce, it was unspoken. The Wonderbolts' two bucks, Lensflare and Gutshot, were unaccounted for. From what little I knew of each of them, I doubted Calamity's memories would be enough to alter either of their minds. Lensflare was his eldest brother's friend and lover; the buck had yet to engage us directly. Gutshot, on the other hoof…

"Whoa," Calamity whistled, pulling me out of my reverie. Ahead of us, the Everfree forest was filled with beautiful plants which glowed a bioluminescent green. Pyrelight flew ahead, dancing amongst the plants, singing merrily. They grew along vines that wrapped around the trees and snaked across the forest floor.

"Yes," Velvet chuckled to the balefire phoenix as Pyrelight swooped back to her, one of the flowers tucked into her feathers by the stem. "It does go nicely with your plumage."

"What d'ya figure they are?" Calamity asked as he flew cautiously into the area. "Think they're safe?" Personally, I wasn't ready to count anything in the Everfree Forest as safe.

"Safe-er, maybe," Reggie commented. "I'll tell you what I ain't seein'. Little vines of blue evil."

"That's cuz…" the hellhound rasped, startling us all enough that Velvet's magic imploded, dropping him. He landed on the soft grass without a grunt. "…phantasmal flowers ur deadly tu killeen joke."

"Deadly how?" Life Bloom asked, the only one of us not focused entirely on the fact that a member of a race of vicious pony-slayers had just woken up in our midst. I didn't want to have a conversation with this monster. The little pony in my head was screaming at me to launch it to the moon. Or, at least, as high as I sent those of its kind who murdered SteelHooves.

"Feed off the same psychic energy, Uh think," the hellhound said, then barked as Calamity immediately retreated from the flowers. "They's harmless. Tu dogs en ponies, Uh mean. But tu killeen joke, they's like weeds in the worst way."

We looked at each other. Reggie finally shrugged. "Well, if you're willin' t' take the word of a one-legged slice-n-dice…" Without further words, she flew into the gently glowing stretch of the Everfree Forest.

Velvet Remedy wrapped her magic around the hellhound again, lifting him up.

"Uh, Velvet?" Calamity asked, wondering just what she was doing. "Ah c'n see not leavin' him in the middle o' a fire. But why don't we leave him here?"

Velvet gave Calamity a honey-sweet smile which she slowly turned on the hellhound as she spoke. "Because we should leave him someplace safe, and if in those flowers is as safe as he says, he won't mind coming with us."

"Pony," the hellhound started, addressing Velvet as she floated him back off the ground. He was still bound, but I couldn't help but notice he hadn't really tested his restraints yet. Hell, he hadn't even tried. "Why save me?"

Velvet Remedy replied without even having to think. "Because you were hurt."

"Ponies don't heal," the hellhound countered. "Ponies kill, destroy, take."

"Strange," Velvet retorted. "That's what ponies say about hellhounds." Wonderful. Why don't we just poke the hellhound with a stick.

"Hey!" Reggie called back to us, having gotten a bit ahead. "There's a… something up here."

Moving forward beneath the glowing orange sky, we discovered a hollowed-out tree, almost as gnarled and twisted as Fluttershy, draped in thick vines and glowing with hundreds of phantasmal flowers. At the foot of the tree, littered amongst its contorted roots, were ancient and fearsome wooden masks carved in faces that looked demonic. Strange bottles and flasks hung from the branches along with a wind chime made of bones. The phantasmal flowers spread out from the tree like ripples from a stone dropped in a lake.

Wait… (be smart!) …I'd seen this before. Places like this. In a dream.

"Shelter?" Life Bloom suggested hopefully.

"Or deathtrap. Our luck, could go either way."

⁂

"Drink," Velvet Remedy commanded with her usual bedside manner as she lifted the bottle of to the albino hellhound's muzzle. "If you're waiting for sparkling water, you'll die of dehydration first." The hollowed tree was a refuge, a home crafted by zebra magic. The bottled brew had come from the refrigerator. Most of what was in the fridge had succumbed to mold, although not of the black and ambulatory kind. Only a few bottles remained unbroken and theoretically safe. "Look, I'll take a sip first, if it helps."

Calamity gazed at the glowing green flowers whose vines embraced the ancient zebra home almost as much inside as out, snaking about all the decaying furniture and hanging from the ceiling. Beautiful and serenely eerie.

There was an old terminal, long dead, amongst the rotting boards that had once been a desk. Or possibly a bureau. The spark battery still had some magic left, and I was hoping I could jury-rig a way to reboot my PipLeg from the remains of the arcano-tech device.

"So, what all d'ya know 'bout these here phantasmal flowers?" Calamity asked. Velvet Remedy hissed at him, eyes narrowed. Talking hellhounds weren't drinking hellhounds. "What?"

"Zebra plants. Used tu make powders tu conjure up frightful illusions," the hellhound told us. "Never kud get that tu work urselves, but mash them up just rite und they make uh fine gloween paste." He grinned, showing lots of very sharp teeth. "Slather it on un old sawhorse covered en brahmin skins and jerk et around on strings like uh puppet, und watch the ponies scream und run from the headless horse."

"Why would you do that?" Velvet Remedy asked.

"Why would anyone be scared o' that?" Reggie wondered.

The hellhound grinned again. "Cuz ponies ur stoopid."

We all glowered at him, except for Reggie who was too busy snickering. Calamity muttered something about the stupidity of saving him, earning another dark look from Velvet.

Finally, the hellhound offered, "Not all dogs want tu kill ponies. Most du. But some of us just want tu be left alone." Scowling, he told us, "Ur alphas wanted war with the old ponies und with the new ponies und with the Goddesses. So we left Maripony. Made ur own home. Made ghosts und the headless horse tu scare ponies away."

Well, better than having them shoot at us.

"That is, till you ponies flew up en one of yur big, black cloud-boats und dropped that damned antenna en ur yard. Made us all sit still while you put those damned helmets on us. Make us go where you want. Kill who you want…"

My hoof hit my face. Perfect. The one group of hellhounds in the entire damned Wasteland that might be friendly, and the Enclave went in and fucked with their heads.

"…All but Barking Saw. That old dog might have the best eyes en the Wasteland, but he's old und senile und, best of all, stone deaf. Took out a mess of you ponies with his sniper rifle already. Bet he's still back at the farm, shooteen anything pony-shaped that pokes its head out."

Well, that would be why the Wonderbolts used the Hope Solar Array to hide in rather than the farm itself. "Why doesn't he just shoot up the broadcasting array?" I asked as I tried futilely to make the terminal do something useful.

The albino hellhound scowled at me. "What part of deaf und senile you don't git?"

"Ouch," Reggie whispered.

I tossed aside my work with the terminal in frustration, turning instead to a locked chest in the corner of the zebra home. It was metal and looked out-of-place with the rest of the age-tattered décor. And unlike the terminal, I knew how to make the lock do what I wanted it to. Out of nostalgia, I floated out a bobby pin and my screwdriver.

Velvet once again pestered the hellhound to drink. I began to suspect his refusal was more a game of piss-off-the-pony to him than borne of any actual concern about the contents.

"Velvet," Life Bloom said, gently putting a hoof on her shoulder. "We need to talk about Xenith. She hasn't woken up yet. The swelling is getting worse. If I'm going to use my trepanation spell, I should do it now."

The lock yielded to me without a fight. I lifted open the chest, looking inside. A stone plate with a carved inscription, an old audio recording, and an oddly-hued hunk of pock-marked rock. Everything else in the chest was decayed into slime and dust. The inscription on the stone was in an archaic pony script, like zebra glyphs, but using symbols including horns, lightning bolts, horseshoes and unicorn busts. I had no idea what it said.

Reggie looked over my shoulder. Then called back, "Hey, any of you know how to read Pretentious?" I snorted, quite sure that wasn't the proper name of the language.

"eh… nope," Calamity said succinctly. Life Bloom and Velvet Remedy strode up to look.

"When the Five are present, a spark will cause the Sixth to be revealed." Life Bloom read. "It's talking about the Elements of Harmony," he said. "A slight variation on a passage from *The Elements of Harmony, A Reference Guide.* Probably the original. From the looks of the stone, this plate was part of the Castle of the Sisters."

"Then what's it doing here?"

I took a closer look at the chest, searching it until I found the gear-shaped Stable-Tec logo stamped onto the bottom corner.

"Stable-Tec built a Stable under the ruins of that castle," I mused. "They must have torn quite a bit of it up to do so." I floated out the audio recording, wishing my PipLeg worked. Or, at least, the terminal.

"If none of you have a particular need for that stone, the Twilight Society would appreciate the right to claim it," Life Bloom said before he and Velvet Remedy returned to discussing Xenith.

"Pffi," Reggie pffted, "What would I want with a dumb rock?" *To bad there isn't an Element of Snarkiness,* the little pony in my head snarked back.

"Ah prefer decorations Ah c'n read muhself," Calamity said, flying away to one of the windows.

The memory that had slipped from my mental grasp earlier returned to dance in front of me. "Velvet!" I spun to face her. "I think…" I paused. Better slow down. This is by no means a sure thing. "I believe there might, and I stress *might,* be a way to save Fluttershy."

The beautiful unicorn mare's eyes opened wide, glistening with eager hope. "How?" she asked, followed promptly by, "Can we do it now?"

"There's a book I read, *Supernaturals.* It's full of old remedies, one of which is to reverse the transformations caused by something called poison joke," I said carefully. "I still have the book back at Junction R-7."

Velvet Remedy smile thankfully, but I was already having serious doubts. "And you think that will turn Fluttershy back into a pony?"

"No," I admitted. I was sure that killing joke was a mutated, vicious cousin of the plant described in *Supernaturals.* But they were vastly different, even in their magical touch. The book said the transformations caused by poison joke occurred overnight, but killing joke inflicted its cruelty instantly. In the very least, it was a far more potent magic. "Not as it is. But I think the recipe is the starting point for creating a cure."

Velvet Remedy nodded, looking grimly determined but still hopeful.

And if it could? Was this really a good idea? What if the cure turned Fluttershy back into a two-century-old pony? And even if she was restored physically to her prime, was there any chance her sanity would be intact? I reluctantly voiced my concerns to Velvet Remedy, only to be surprised by her resolve.

"If that is the case, then I will do what Fluttershy needs me to," Velvet Remedy stated flatly. "But one way or another, her torture ends."

The room fell quiet.

A realization passed over Velvet's face. She turned to Life Bloom. "Now it's not just my friend's life you hold in your horn, but the life of the greatest of ponies too." She bit her lower lip. "Xenith is the only one who knows enough about herbs and alchemy and magical plants to know how to create a new recipe from Littlepip's old one. Do what you have to do. And may the Goddesses' hooves guide you."

Having said those words, Velvet Remedy slowly walked over towards where Calamity was standing, watching her. Her last steps faltered and he moved to support her, holding her close.

Calamity nuzzled the weary unicorn lovingly, then turned to stare out the window at this eerily beautiful patch of the Everfree Forest.

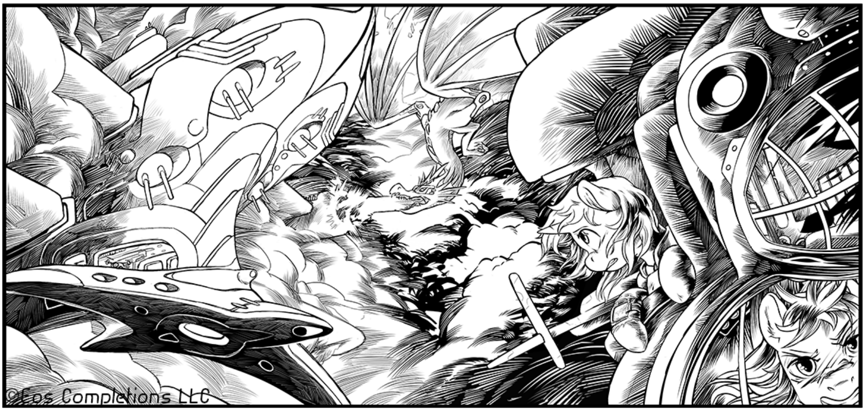
His expression slowly hardened.

"uh, folks. Ya better take a look at this…"

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Forty-Three

The Kingdom of the Blind



"Are you not happy that your quest is complete and you can return to your studies in Canterlot?"

"…rocks.

"I can't believe this whole war has been about rocks. Gems. Coal. Rarity said something about a meteorite, but she got all evasive when she realized I had overheard. Whatever. (Like it was hard to figure out. Sometimes I'm slow, but I'm not stupid.)

"Dumb rocks.

"I used to think rocks were cool. I mean, my big sister has gems for a cutie mark. And Pinkie Pie once lived on a rock farm. We even used to play a game, Scootaloo and Apple Bloom and me. We found the rock that Rarity had gotten her cutie mark from, and I made Twilight Sparkle enchant it so that we can make it open and close (she kinda owed us for that whole Smarty Pants thing). We called it the Rock of Destiny, and we'd pretend that when it opened up, it would give us our cutie marks. Twilight made it so each of us could set a pass phrase to open it. Mine was 'Dumb Rock' so I could pretend I was just like my sister. (I changed it to 'Apple Pie' for a while, but then changed it back. Just as well. My sis and I haven't been apple pie in a long time. Not since the Ministries.)

"I hope you don't mind me using your place. I mean, of course you can't mind, but I hope you don't anyway. Sometimes, I just have to get away from all the noise. It's so nice and peaceful here. And I really love your flowers.

"Anyway, I guess I'm thinking about rocks because we found chunks of that meteorite when we dug into Luna's old foundry under the castle last week. It was all broken up because they'd taken all the ore out of it, and they'd sealed up the pieces. I felt kinda sorry for it. Ponies and zebras blame it for all sorts of stupid stuff. It's not the rock's fault. It's just a rock. And I kinda know what it's like, being blamed for

stuff. (Seems, sometimes, everything I do just makes things worse.) So I had them make one of the bigger chunks into a cornerstone. As an apology or something, I dunno. Make it feel useful. Yes, I know that's stupid; it's just a rock.

"So… I guess not dumb rocks. Just dumb ponies and zebras.

"I came up here yesterday. Building the last Stable in Everfree was my idea, so I wanted to be here. Especially after we started having problems. (Rarity said that Everfree Forest is the one place she was sure the zebra's wouldn't attack; so I thought, 'Why are we putting all the Stables in places we think they will attack? Doesn't it make sense to put at least one somewhere they won't?' Yes, the forest is dangerous, but it can't be that dangerous – you lived here, and my sister and her friends used to go into it all the time. Well… just another of my ideas that ended up a mess.)

Apple Bloom had warned me about the poison joke, but was it always this… aggressive? It's been really bad the last three days. Moonbeam said it's like the excavation is attracting it. He thinks that either it's vibrosensitive (which isn't even a word) or it wants to be near people, but that doesn't make any sense. It's a plant, right? But then, Apple Bloom says you told her the plants want a laugh. How can a plant want something?

"I'm sorry. I know I'm rambling. I guess my thoughts aren't too coherent. I'm just trying to work things out.

"I think…

"I think we've lost our faith.

"Does that make any sense? It's like everything we're supposed to believe in has gotten dark and crumbled. Like the air is heavy. No… that doesn't make any sense. Like… I dunno. Like everything is too real. You know, like when you're just a filly and you look up to someone and they're your idol? But then you learn they're not perfect like you imagined? That they're flawed, just like everypony else? Maybe that's just growing up though.

"It's like we've forgotten how to have heroes. Only worse. We've forgotten how to believe in each other. In ponies. Even Scootaloo… she's trying to fix ponies with all these experiments.

"I once told Scootaloo I thought she was trying to make ponies like they were when we were kids. You know what she said? She said, 'Nostalgia is mostly just make-believe.' Isn't that horrible?

"I… um…

"I've started having second thoughts. Maybe we should just stick to saving ponies. Maybe it's not right for us to try to fix things. But then, won't it all be for nothing, like Scootaloo says?

"I don't know anymore. Sometimes these experiments feel…. I dunno… wrong. I know they're not dangerous. We've made extra, extra sure. But I still don't feel right doing experiments on ponies who are just trying to survive. Isn't that wrong? It's not like it's their fault… not most of them, anyway. (The ones in Stable One, maybe.) I just want to save them and give them a chance. Kinda like the rocks, I guess.

"I even almost told Rarity about the experiments. But I didn't. Because… well… I'd be betraying Scootaloo and Apple Bloom if I told. And I'm not sure Rarity would do the right thing if I told her. I really don't like the Ministry of Image. And if that's

what she is now…

"…Like I said before, we haven't been apple pie in a long time. Sometimes, the little statue of Rarity that my sister gave me feels more like my sister than she does.

"Today, I did ask Scootaloo if Stable 101 could be made a 'control' Stable instead, but she and Apple Bloom both insisted the experiment here was too important.

"And part of me still thinks Scootaloo's right. Like maybe we really do have to fix ponies. To figure out what went wrong so everything doesn't get so… so… bad again. But how many times do we have to try before we get it right? And what happens when we fail? This time, the cost can be so much more than tree sap and pine needles.

"…

"Scootaloo has been looking at me funny. I think maybe she knows I'm having second thoughts.

"Anyway… sorry for all the rambling. Thanks for letting me use your place. And thanks for listening. Apple Bloom is right. You really are a good person to talk to, Zecora.

"We're all very, very sad about what happened to you. I hope you're at peace."

* * *

You better take a look at this…

We all stared upwards, our eyes lifted above the dark silhouettes of the forest trees. The sky was a cloudy haze that glowed a hellish orange, lit from the fires that stretched for miles below. Our gazes were fixed on the massive black shadow slowly moving through the Everfree fire-sky, brilliant flashes of lightning erupting along its sides. It was moving towards us, but we were not its destination.

The *Overcast.*

This was a day too soon. Goddesses damn him, Colonel Autumn Leaf was jumping the whistle on his own attack plan!

"Muh brother's on that ship." Calamity's tone was dour.

I pranced in agitation. This was not good. Why the hell would he…? A sudden wave of weariness passed over me. It had been far too long, and far too rough a day. I needed sleep. I wasn't going to get it.

Above us, more lightning flashed as the four raptors moored to the *Overcast* began to pull away, their smaller thunderclouds pulling free of the Thunderhead warship's massive ones. Two of them began to move ahead while the other two flanked the mobile siege platform.

"Okay," I said, spinning around and addressing the others. "Change of plan…" I looked over the ponies (and griffin) who had followed me this far. Part of me dreaded what I was about to say. But part of me knew it would somehow be this way. "…We'll have to split up."

Before anypony could protest, I explained, "The Enclave is moving on the Cathedral now. They'll be there in, what, a few hours?" I looked to Calamity who nodded at my assessment. "And we can't all go. Xenith shouldn't be moved anymore, especially not after Life Bloom uses his spell." With a grudging reluctance, I added, "And neither should the hellhound."

Velvet Remedy agreed quietly, staring back at her patients. Life Bloom was moving about Xenith's bed, preparing to cast his trepanation spell.

"Life Bloom and I need to stay," she intoned, sparing me the task of saying it. She smiled sadly to Calamity, "And you, love, need to go."

"Pyrelight," I instructed. "Keep them safe." The balefire phoenix hooted, perching up straight and giving me a one-winged salute.

"Ah don't know if Ah c'n do this…" Calamity admitted. "After all he's done, after all the ponies dead… Ah know Autumn needs t' be put down. But Ah don't think Ah can…" He looked at me, his eyes wide and hurting. "Muh own brother."

I remembered Pride's change after learning the Enclave had marked Calamity for death. That, in fact, Autumn Leaf (his own brother!) had ordered my best friend's execution.

"Then it's a good thing you're takin' me with you," Reggie said flatly.

Velvet Remedy gave a pained look.

"It's a hard thing, goin' against kin," Reggie said. "T' take down your own brother… I don't think I could have done it if Kage had gone bad. Nobody blames you fer not takin' that shot."

Calamity watched her check the load on her guns, guns he had custom made for the adolescent griffin. "If it helps at all, you'll be puttin' a stop t' his murderin' ways even still." It struck me that Reggie viewed those guns as a stand-in for Calamity – a way for him to be part of what he needed to be but couldn't – much in the same way she carried Kage's blades.

"So, Li'lpip, what's the plan?" Calamity asked. "How the hell are we s'posed t' make it through miles o' fire an' whatever else Everfree's keepin' in it's back pocket, an' get t' Red Eye's base b'fore they do?"

"We don't," I answered him simply. I raised a hoof to the sky, pointing towards the *Overcast.* "We're going to hitch a ride. On that."

* * *

Calamity, Reggie and I made our preparations while Life Bloom's horn glowed and he tried to work a miracle. We didn't have a lot of time. We wanted to give the *Overcast* enough time to pass us by, but not enough to move out of sight.

"This is a stealth mission," I proclaimed, wincing at the groans. "Hey, we've got this one in the bag. We've got two stealth cloaks now," I pointed out, counting the albino hellhound's cloak along with Xenith's. "And I have the advanced StealthBuck."

"Which only works for a few hours," Velvet Remedy warned.

"True, but we shouldn't need it for even that," I suggested. "Once we get up there, we'll snag a set of Enclave magically-powered armor for Calamity, and I'll take the cloak."

"Aw, crap," Calamity muttered. He dipped his head, tossing off his hat. "Can't be bringin' this then." He stared at his trusty black desperado hat. Half of it was badly burned from the Buccaneer Blaze. To be honest, it no longer really looked right on his head. In fact, it made me wince, remembering how painfully hurt he had been.

"Ah loved that hat."

"I'll take care of it until you get back," Velvet Remedy promised, her words carrying a subtle insistence that he would come back.

Brilliant scarlet light flashed over Xenith then settled in a halo about her head, making her look like a sleeping angel. I remembered how she looked with bat-like wings the day she saved her daughter. The mental images combined strangely.

Life Bloom was sweating, straining in focused concentration.

Calamity dumped the contents of his saddlebags (which I swear took up more space in the hut than the saddlebags could possibly have held, and had apparently come to include several bottles and jars of desiccated herbs and dust that Calamity had scavenged from the hut itself) insisting he wanted to "travel light."

"You won't fight your brother, but you'll be taking as much of his ship as you can carry, won't you?"

"Ayep."

Reggie, meanwhile, had decided she was as ready as she could be, and was leaning in the doorway, smoking another cigarette. Velvet Remedy huffed at her.

"Yeah, right," Reggie said with a roll of her eyes. "I shouldn't smoke. Might burn down the forest or somethin'."

"You could at least show some respect for your health," Velvet commented.

Reggie just lifted an eyebrow then waved a wing the direction of the ponies she had chosen to assist, particularly me. "Yeah. Cuz I'm well known fer makin' healthy choices."

Velvet opened her muzzle, a retort on her tongue, then closed it again as a look of heartbreaking defeat blanketed her body. "It's too late, isn't it?"

"'Bout the smokin' or me followin' you lot?" Reggie blew a ring of smoke. "Way I see it, if I quit, it would be like sayin' I made a mistake in insistin' on lendin' a wing. An' that would be like saying *Kage* made a mistake. An', well… that just ain't gonna happen."

But Velvet wasn't talking about Reggie's life choices. She turned to me with a horrified look. "Littlepip… please… be honest…" Her voice was fragile. "The fire… how long before it reaches Fluttershy?" She swallowed hard. "It's already there, isn't it? She's already dead. Or… or…" My lovely unicorn friend could not bring herself to say that Fluttershy was dying. But it was clear from the pain in her expression that she was imagining Fluttershy, burning alive slowly in utter agony. It was too cruel an end for too cruel a life. I couldn't bring myself to say that, by my best estimate, the fire had been there since nightfall. Maybe it was corrupted kindness to be dishonest about this, but I just couldn't tell her the truth. It would destroy her.

I opened my muzzle to lie. But I was interrupted before I managed the first word.

"Doesn't matter," Reggie told her, drawing stares and glares from everyone except Life Bloom, who was too deep in concentration to notice his surroundings.

"…" Velvet stared, muzzle open, her heart tearing apart in front of us. "…what…?"

Reggie looked taken aback. "Oh, wait…" She looked at us all. "You don't know?"

"Know what?" Calamity said carefully.

"The fire ain't burnin' the trees," Reggie announced. My jaw was not the only one to drop. She looked at us and shook her head. "Hells, it would be easier if I showed you. I don't think you'd believe me otherwise."

"What do you mean, the fires aren't burning the trees?"

"Just that," Reggie replied. "Got a good look after you all ran off and left me half-dead in a tree." As she said that, her voice was not accusatory. If anything, she sounded amused. "Red Eye's fire brigade pushed past my position. Saw 'em hose down a moss-covered tree with one o' their flamethrowers. I swear on my mother's name that the flames went right through the tree like it wasn't even there."

"But…" Velvet's voice betrayed her desperation, "But we saw the trees burning! When we were fighting the Wonderbolts, remember?" She looked at me, and I could sense that she wanted me to tell her it was just her imagination. That Reggie was right and there was nothing to worry about. I thanked Luna that this time I didn't need to lie.

"Those trees were burning because of that trick Skydive pulled," I reminded her. "That wasn't from Red Eye's fires."

Calamity shook his head, looking at Regina. "An' ya didn't mention this b'fore…?"

"Hells, I thought you knew. Besides, I was totally focused on the rest of the freaky!" The griffin tossed her cigarette to the floor and ground it under a hindpaw. "The tree didn't catch, but the moss on it sure ignited. Then it began t' heave an' thrash an' tear itself off the tree even as it burnt up. I swear it looked like it was screamin'. I'll have nightmares for weeks!"

"Well daymn," Calamity whistled.

"The fire… isn't burning… Fluttershy's safe?" Warring emotions wracked Velvet Remedy.

"Yes," I murmured, my eyes going wide as the gears in my mind started turning again. I had seen the reports of Red Eye's research into Bypass Spells. *His scientists had been working to apply a bypass to some sort of weapon effect. The full details had been redacted after the research had been successful.* Xenith had told me she had worked in one of the buildings where they were creating flamethrower fuel, but I'd never put the two together. "At least… for now."

"For now?" Velvet's voice was small, but hopeful.

"Red Eye ain't the sort t' waste resources, is he, Li'lpip?" Calamity asked, clearly following my train of thought. "He's cleansin' the Everfree Forest, but he ain't gonna burn down the trees. He wants the lumber."

I nodded.

I could see a calculating light in Velvet's eyes. Her quest now had a timeline that she could see. Xenith had to recover, and they had to brew a remedy that would save Fluttershy, before Red Eye's forces finished burning the forest and proceeded far enough in their harvesting to reach the top of Killing Joke Hill.

"You want dis?" the hellhound interrupted abruptly, holding up his zebra stealth cloak; his bindings lay useless around him. "Ur not gitteen it less you give me sometheen back." There was a dangerous glint in his eyes.

"What do you want in return for your generous offer?" Velvet asked diplomatically as she pointedly looked at the stump of a leg which she had treated and dressed.

"Them claw blades," the hellhound barked, pointing at Kage's hellhound claw knives strapped in Reggie's belt.

"Oh HELLS no!" The young griffin flew almost within claw reach of the hellhound, guns drawn, before she was yanked short, her tail in Calamity's teeth. "These. Are. My. Brother's!"

"Uh figger they belonged tu one uh *ur* brothers before him," the hellhound growled back, unimpressed and vicious.

"How jush holl on!" Calamity came as close to shouting as he could without letting Reggie's tail out of his mouth. "Ah figger we c'n shoof ya an' haf bofe!" He shifted, pointing his battle saddle at the hellhound.

Being an amputee had not made him any less dangerous; the albino hellhound was swifter than any of us expected. He had an arm around Velvet Remedy, his claws – sharp enough and strong enough to slice metal – right against her face! Their barest touch was drawing blood. Velvet eeped sharply.

"How fast?" he challenged coldly.

I levitated Little Macintosh in front of me. "Let her go, real gentle, or you are so amazingly dead it won't matter."

Astonishingly, the crippled hellhound stared down the five guns pointed at him and didn't blink.

Velvet's horn flashed. The hellhound dropped limply back onto his bed, one of his claws sliding across Velvet's face as his hand fell away. Blood gushed from the wound, staggering her.

"Don't shoot him," she ordered as she stumbled back, holding a hoof to her face. The claw had barely missed slicing open one of her eyes. "Littlepip! Your spell. Please!"

We had used up all the healing bandages and potions that we had. There was nothing left to aid Velvet with but the dark spell I had been granted by The Black Book. Once again, I let myself draw on that knowledge to create a cast from Velvet's own blood, wrapping half her head in a ruddy mask.

Calamity rushed to Velvet's side, shoring her up. He growled at the hellhound and clearly really, really wanted to shoot the monster. But Velvet wouldn't let him. Instead, she turned to her attacker and spoke with a touch of sympathy.

"I completely agree with how abhorrent it is that some ponies have made weapons out of your kind's *body parts.*" She looked at us with the one eye not hidden under solidified blood. "And anypony here who doesn't should try to imagine seeing a creature wielding a weapon made of pony hooves!"

Addressing the (extremely pissed-looking) albino again, "So in trade for the use of your cloak, we are giving you this…" Her horn glowed again, and Xenith's hellhound-claw helmet floated over and rested upon the albino hellhound's chest (ignoring the strangled sound of protest from Calamity). "… but you will not be taking Kage Grimfeather's blades from Regina," she added sternly. "I am sorry."

She frowned. "And for your aggression, you will be spending the rest of our time together under the effects of this spell. It is never intelligent to attack your doctor."

Velvet Remedy stepped away. Then her knees gave a little tremble. A moment later, she had dropped to them, breathing heavily, letting her panic wash over her now that the crisis had passed.

Calamity laid down next to her and held her, nuzzling her gently. She buried her face in his mane, shedding tears born from the rollercoaster of hope, despair and mortal danger that the last few minutes had thrown my friend through.

The scarlet glow faded, and Life Bloom staggered, slumping to the floor next to Xenith. Pulling her muzzle out of Calamity's orange mane, Velvet Remedy immediately bombarded Life Bloom with questions about how it went; the only answer he could give was a weak, "We shall see. It's up to her now."

"Then she'll pull through," Velvet proclaimed, her breathing still a little shaky. She seemed to draw strength from caring for her friends. "Xenith's a fighter. A survivor. More than you could know."

I discovered I was smiling. Just a little.

Somewhere, somepony gave what sounded like a polite cough.

I caught Reggie's movement out of the corner of my eye. She drew her guns at the speed of Rainbow Dash and had the twins pointed out the doorway in front of her.

"We got company," she warned, growling.

Dammit! I was so hoping the Enclave would pass Zecora's Hut without taking interest. I really didn't want to fight right now.

Velvet moaned. Behind me, Life Bloom was trying to get up; but he was too exhausted to stand, barely able to keep his eyes open. "Enclave?" he asked. Pyrelight swept across the room to perch on Reggie's head, glaring out the door with her.

"No," Reggie said, wincing at Pyrelight's talons. "Red Eye. One o' his damned sprite-bots."

True, it made sense he'd have some wandering this close to his home base, but I heard no music. Watcher!

"Wait," I called out, waving. "Hold your fire. This might be a friendly."

* * *

Thunder rumbled overhead like the steady beat of war drums. The *Overcast* was passing directly above us, the massive siege platform blocking out the fiery light reflecting off of the clouds of smoke; the flowers ringing Zecora's Hut seemed to shed even more beautiful bioluminescence in the deeper darkness.

Colonel Autumn Leaf was either oblivious to our presence, or he was too focused now to care.

"It's been a long time since my home felt crowded," Watcher was saying. With the mechanical monotone of the sprite-bot, I couldn't tell if he was pleased or complaining. "At least half of the people you asked me to gather have already arrived."

"Huh?" Calamity blinked. "Li'lpip? Ya asked him t' what now?"

"We don't have enough time," I told my pegasus friend bluntly. "The Enclave is moving too fast; I can't be everywhere at once…" Truth was, I was about to ask even more of Spike. And he wasn't going to like it.

"Don'tcha mean *we?"* Calamity asked pointedly. My little pony scowled at me and virtually grabbed my head, making me nod apologetically.

"Yes… but, that's kinda the point," I offered lamely. "We need every ally we can get if we're going to pull this off…"

"Ah note ya still haven't filled us in on exactly what this plan o' yers is," Calamity groused. "Ah'm trustin' there's a good reason fer that."

"There is," I assured him. Yeah. Great reason: you would try to stop me if you knew. "In the meantime, I've asked Watcher to contact all the people we know who can help and start bringing them together."

"And I'm afraid I have some bad news," Watcher said through the sprite-bot. "One of your guests isn't going to be able to make it." I felt an icy cold wash through my mane. The obvious implication was that someone had died.

"Who?" I asked, the little pony in my head suggesting we really didn't want to know. "What happened?"

"Homage," Watcher said, and my world plunged out from under me, leaving me in a numbingly cold void. Luna… no…

The sensation was as intense as it was brief, dispelled by Watcher's next words, "And nothing yet. But the Enclave has figured out that DJ Pon3 is moving from one S.P.P. tower to another, hacking in to make those broadcasts, and they've started parking Raptors above each of the towers, just waiting for her to make her next move."

Thank you, Luna! Celestia please keep her safe!

A huge part of me wanted to dash off to her aid. But doing so could lead the enemy right to her. And I knew she would not approve of me abandoning the good fight just to make it to her side.

"Fortunately, the Enclave don't have enough Raptors to spare for every tower, and she's not making it easy for them," Watcher explained. "But their dragnet is eventually going to catch her."

"Not if we c'n help it." Calamity stepped up beside me, putting a hoof on my head. "If Ah know Li'lpip, this plan o' hers is gonna pull the heat offa Homage in a big way."

I gave him a worried but thankful smile. He was right about that. We had to win now. We always had to, but now it was for more than just the wasteland. Now I was fighting to keep Homage safe. I realized how horribly selfish it was of me to place the safety of one pony as equal to the needs of tens or even hundreds of thousands of ponies. But I didn't care. Homage was… Homage was Homage, and I was allowed to be just a little selfish when it came to her, wasn't I?

"Homage herself insisted she can't make it. She doesn't want to risk drawing the Enclave to the rest of… the Resistance is what she's calling all you guys." *Resistance Radio.* That's what the Tenpony residents had taken to calling DJ Pon3's broadcasts. Clearly, she'd adopted the moniker. "I'll try to have a sprite-bot nearby so she can talk to us," Watcher offered. "And she told me to tell you that she's sending some more allies your way."

Allies are good. I liked allies. We could use all the friends we could get.

Then reality struck. The blow hit me, cold and sharp and hard, nearly knocking me over. Part of me had been clinging to the belief that I would see Homage again when I gathered everyone together at Spike's cave… at that final gathering before I set my plan into action. A final respite before I galloped headlong into my destiny.

But Homage, the one pony I wanted and needed to see most, was not going to be there. At most, I might hear her voice. Speak to her. But she would not be there to touch, to hold, to kiss… goodbye.

My legs were wet noodles, utterly unable to hold the titanic weight of my breaking heart. *I was never going to see Homage again.*

With a burst of static, the sprite-bot started playing the heavy, ominous music of the Enclave. Watcher was gone. His time was up. I barely noticed. I was too busy crying my heart out.

The drumming of the *Overcast's* thunderclouds was receding. There was no more time. We needed to go.

I realized I could still hear the low horns and booming drums, the mournful tones of violins: the music from the sprite-bot. It hadn't wandered away. It was watching us.

I knew there was no way that Red Eye had been using these things for so long – had been running operations in Fillydelphia from a Ministry of Morale hub – without knowing that these machines could be used to spy.

Grim resolve flooded through me, drowning out the agony in my heart. Not killing it, but just letting me not feel it for a while. I pushed myself to my hooves and strode determinedly over to where the sprite-bot was floating amongst the trees, still within sight of Zecora's Hut.

Red Eye knew we were here. Knew where to find us. I wanted to make it clear that wasn't necessary.

"We're coming," I told the sprite-bot, sure that I was all but addressing Red Eye directly. "That's what you wanted, right?"

The sprite-bot kept playing music.

I stared at it for a long minute, possibly two, before turning away in disgust. "Calamity! Reggie! Let's go hitch ourselves a ride."

I started to walk away from the sprite-bot, then stopped. I trotted back around to it, my horn glowing softly as I announced, "Sorry. I have to kill you." This time, however, I wasn't addressing Red Eye, but the sprite-bot itself. My PipLeg was still dead, and I was going to use the little spy machine to reboot it.

My telekinesis opened the repair hatch on the sprite-bot and yanked its spark battery.

The sprite-bot dropped like a stone. Dead. Or the robot equivalent of dead.

Sitting, I proceeded to disconnect audio and video feeds then bring it back to life, a robot vegetable. (Or something like that. Whatever. Stupid robots, making all my metaphors awkward.)

I looked down at where my PipBuck was grotesquely melded into my foreleg. Miserably, I realized that maybe it was for the best that Homage never saw me again. Let her last memories of me be before the balefire bomb. Before Canterlot. And before Arbu.

Life Bloom approached me as I was rebooting my PipLeg.

I assumed he was going to offer comfort, or ask a question about Watcher or the gathering. I pre-empted the conversation, somepony else on my mind. "How did you meet Homage?" My voice sounded small to me. I didn't have the will to hide the sadness that was leaking into it.

Life Bloom paused, then sat down next to me. "The Twilight Society assigned her to me," he told me. "They thought I would be able to connect with her."

Leaning forward on his forehooves, Life Boom gave me the story. "When she first gained residency in Tenpony Tower, she was in mourning. She'd lost the mare she loved, and she didn't know if she could ever find love again." He smiled gently. "I'm happy to see she was wrong."

That only made it hurt worse. My heart was bleeding onto the ground and I could feel the tears building up behind my eyes. They felt like fire. Even worse, the little pony in my head didn't really want to hear about Homage's past loves. Of course she had to have had at least one. You can't get to be as… *good* as she was without practice, right? But I liked being able to pretend otherwise. Even though I knew better. Even though I was pretty sure I knew who it was.

Jokeblue.

I wasn't going to be jealous. Not of Homage's dead beloved. I refused to be that horrible.

"We were the same age, and I'd suffered loss of my own that the others in the Society thought was similar," Life Bloom continued, his tone suggesting that the Society was in error on that supposition. He explained, "I was kicked out of The Republic after they discovered I had a preference for stallions."

I blinked in surprise. "W-what?"

The Republic, I remembered, was the little town that the raiders from Fluttershy's cottage had massacred. A *bizarrre, cult-like group o' weirdoes, but not bad ponies* according to the Wasteland Crusaders.

"They kicked you out because of *that?"* I was astounded. Since my youth, I had been resigned to my feelings for mares lowering my prospects for finding love. But I'd never experienced actual prejudice because of it. I couldn't even fathom that. "Why? Why would they even care?"

"Fer the same reason, Ah'll reckon, that the Enclave rewards it," Calamity said, approaching us, his words prompting another *wait, what?* from the little pony in my head. "Population control. Small place like The Republic, Ah bet they needed as many babies as they could get."

Life Bloom nodded, frowning. "And if I wasn't going to contribute to the growth of The Republic, I wasn't wanted."

"And the Enclave?" I asked, driven by morbid curiosity. My PipLeg hummed to life, the screen flashing status reports. I brought up my E.F.S. and checked the most critical readouts.

"There's only so much cropland above the cloud curtain, all o' it 'round those towers. Too many pegasi means famine. The Enclave keeps real tight reins on childbirth."

Officially, y'all are probably dead already, Calamity had told Tracker and the other pegasi in New Appleloosa. *By the weekend, the Enclave will 'ave delivered condolences and new birth-approval certificates t' yer families.*

"Bein' allowed an extra foal is one o' the perks a pegasus gets fer enlistin' with the Enclave," Calamity admitted, "So while there's nothin' official, the Enclave has a little extra appreciation fer those officers who won't be takin' advantage o' that benefit."

I sat and thought about that for a moment. Then shook it off like a wet coat. "We really need to go." I stood up, looking down to Life Bloom. "But when we get back, I'll want to hear everything you can tell me about Homage."

He gave me an odd look.

"I'm not prying," I explained. "I just… I miss her."

* * *

Within minutes, we were soaring through the smoke. Beneath us, we could see the flames burning through the forest. True to Reggie's claim, the trees were not burning, although occasionally it appeared they were as the moss or vines clinging to them were cremated.

We were all wearing scarves to protect us from the worst of the smoke, but it only mitigated the foulness. My lungs burned, my eyes were stinging and felt hot in my skull. Most of that was from the smoke, but not all of it. I was exhausted, even more so after hearing Watcher's soul-crushing news. It took massive, almost monumental, effort just to keep my eyes open.

fwut!

I yelped as something struck my left hindhoof, a lancing pain followed by a burning sensation. I lifted it, spotting a dart-like thorn impaling the underside of my hoof. The burning increased. Poison.

fwut fwut fwut fwut

"Goldangit!" Calamity hollered, banking sharply as the air filled with more plant spikes. A patch of forest vegetation was shooting at us! Goddesses, I hated this forest.

The plants stopped shooting as the fires reached them. Calamity braved thicker smoke in an effort to keep us out of the range of any more of Everfree's hostile plant life.

The fire in my hoof started to climb up my leg, achingly painful. But I'd suffered so much worse. Hell, I'd been set on fire by a dragon. Compared to that, hell, compared to the plethora of hurts from the battle with the Wonderbolts, the plant spike poison was trivial.

We were catching up to the *Overcast,* but it was taking time. I held off activating the MG StealthBuck II for fear that it would run out before we had secured a hiding place on the Thunderhead.

I closed my eyes for a few minutes. I was using my levitation to make myself weightless in Calamity's arms. I felt safe there. I could close my eyes for just a minute…

I was Rainbow Dash.

The clouds were a beautiful white, fluffy and soft under my hooves. And they stretched out forever beneath the warm glow of Celestia's sun. I could see colorful pegasi flitting and flying about. There was a town nearby, but I wasn't looking at it. I didn't want to.

Instead, I looked at the ocean of white that rolled out beneath a canopy of brightest blue.

I was Rainbow Dash, and I was not a happy pony.

Everywhere under those clouds was Equestria. Or what was left of it. Everywhere beneath was a nightmarish hell where those ponies unfortunate enough to not be in Stables and not be killed in the onslaught were struggling and dying.

And I was watching ponies fly about, happily ignoring what was out of sight beneath what some ponies were beginning to call "the Cloud Curtain".

It wasn't right.

Nevermind that all my friends, all of them, were somewhere down there, and I didn't know if they were dead or alive. I couldn't just live up here and pretend Equestria didn't exist anymore. I could understand the temptation, true. But I wasn't that kind of pony. And it hurt more than my heart could bear that apparently the rest of the pegasi were willing to be.

I wanted to be disgusted with all of them. Instead, I just felt sad.

I was Rainbow Dash, and I was ashamed to be a pegasus.

If this was what being a pegasus meant now… well, maybe it was time for me to go.

I felt my wings flap, slowly lifting my hooves off the clouds. I loved flying, but today I could barely find the inspiration to lift myself. My head drooped low, my body hanging from my wings like dead weight. My hooves brushed against the clouds as I began to move.

I turned around, my back to the colorful flying ponies. I took one last glance backwards before flying away…

…I awoke in a coughing fit violent enough that Calamity crushed me to him to keep me from jerking out of his forelegs.

Below us, we were passing over part of the fire brigade moving through an already-burned part of the forest. I watched as a unicorn marched forward before a wing of Red Eye's griffins, her horn glowing. The glow spread out over the ground in front of her, lighting up a large swath of blackened forest floor. A moment later, the ground churned, tearing itself apart.

The griffins swept forward with their flamethrowers, setting ablaze the tangles of blue vines that the unicorn's tilling spell had uncovered.

"Whoa, there, Li'lpip!" Calamity comforted. "Ya okay there?"

"Y-yes. Sorry," I apologized, bringing my levitating field back up around me. "Dozed off."

"Yeah, Ah reckon when we get aboard, we're gonna find a place t' lay low an' yer gonna take a nap." Ahead of us, the *Overcast* loomed closer. We would be on it within a few minutes. "Ya might only get a couple hours, but that's a couple hours better than none."

I turned on my advanced StealthBuck. We were getting close enough that all of us needed to be invisible. Reggie and Calamity followed suit, donning the hoods of their zebra stealth cloaks.

A strange silhouette shot out of the sky – a dark figure the size and shape of a pony but with leathery bat-like wings that reminded me strongly of Xenith and her flying amulet – and impacted one of the Raptors like a bullet.

"What the hells was that?" Reggie's voice blurted. "Either of you see that too?"

The Raptor began to veer off, moving away from the Thunderhead. I floated my earboom into my ear and quickly sought out the Enclave's military channel.

"…been breached. I repeat, we have unknown hostiles aboard," the voice from the Raptor's communications officer sounded professional, unconcerned, even bored. **"Disengaging from position to deal with the intruders."**

The *Overcast* was still hours away from the Cathedral, and attacks were already starting. I had no doubt that Red Eye was behind this attack, but something wasn't right. Sending a single creature against them wasn't going to stop them. It wouldn't even slow them down. And that meant it wasn't intended to.

"Acknowledged, *Raptor Lenticular*. Rendevous at the target as soon as you have exterminated the infestation."

I suspected, rather, that Red Eye was just looking to soften the Enclave up a bit before pulling whatever big surprise he had hidden beneath his cloak.

"Lenticular* to *Overcast!" This time, the officer's voice sounded panicked. **"It's the demon! I repeat, the *demon* is on board!"**

The. What. Now?

Reggie started to say something but I waved a hoof for her to be quiet – which in retrospect was really silly since I was invisible – my attention fully on the conversation in my earbloom.

***"Overcast* to *Lenticular*. Please confirm. Are you reporting that the monster which downed the *Mammatus* is…"**

The officer aboard the *Overcast* never got to finish his question, much less get an answer. A loud whine tore at my eardrum, and the Enclave's inter-warship military channel became death.

I bucked in Calamity's grip, my vision going red as agony tore through my brain and took hold of my horn. I quickly shut off my PipLeg's radio, gasping and wiping blood from my eyes. Whatever was aboard the *Lenticular* had just infected the military channel with the Canterlot signal!

By Luna's mane!

We had run into corrupted broadcasters in Zebratown. Even with Canterlot itself gone, any broadcaster that survived would still create a zone of malignant noise. Hell, still had one of those in my saddlebags. It had never occurred to me that somepony might think to use one of those devices to actually broadcast across a normal channel!

Fortunately for the Enclave, all they had to do to survive was turn their radios off. But this meant that they were about to fly into battle against Red Eye's forces without communications.

The battle was engaged.

* * *

The burning in my hoof had consumed my entire left hindleg before fading dully. My leg felt stiff and swollen, but the worst seemed to be over. The plant spike poison was far from lethal. At least, not to anything larger than a rabbit.

Aside from the earlier plant attack, the stealth mission seemed to be going perfectly. Nopony shot at us as we drew close behind the *Overcast,* all the Thunderhead's dangerous magical weapons were pointing forward. We just needed to fly up to a hatch, pick the lock, and slip inside. And with Calamity's knowledge of the Thunderheads, we found a hatch in no time.

I cursed the Enclave, the pegasi and the entire concept of wings the moment I saw it. Fucking cloud-locks.

"Ain't gonna be able t' pick this one," Calamity said, his voice muffled. I wasn't sure if he was talking about himself or me. Probably both.

"Rainbow!" I called out as loudly as I dared to this close to the *Overcast.*

"dash," came the muffled response. Unlike StealthBucks, the zebra cloaks dampened sound: it was impossible to tell where Reggie was, but at least she was still close.

"Okay, back-up plan," Calamity announced just loud enough for Reggie (we hoped) to hear. We couldn't actually be sure where the griffin was, and had already resorted to call-response navigating. I had begun to regret not using rope to tie ourselves together. "We get up above this thing, near one o' the landin' bays, an' wait fer somepony t' open a door."

With that, Calamity beat his wings, drawing us higher.

Below us, the hatch hissed open. "coming?" the muffled voice of the griffin asked.

I tried to exchange a look with Calamity. And, of course, totally failed.

"honestly, way you two act, you'd think littlepip is the only person in the entire wasteland who c'n pick a lock."

* * *

We were inside the corridors of the *Overcast,* the thrumming of its thunderclouds rumbling against hull. The vibration mixed with the hum of the lights; the hum seemed deeper here than in the *Raptor Pyrocumulus* or inside the Stables – more ominous – but that could have just been my imagination. The voices of pegasus ponies were omnipresent in all but the most isolated passageways.

The corridors were painted black, making the lights seem to provide stunted illumination. Colored stripes ran down the middle of the walls like an abbreviated rainbow, the paint reflecting the light that the rest of the walls absorbed, making them seem to glow. The colored lines weren't solid, but had slanted breaks, and they would change, dropping away or being added as we moved through the ship. I gleaned that they were some sort of color-coded guidance stripes that would tell an Enclave pegasus if the hallway they were in would take them to the section of the massive ship that they wanted. There were monitors placed at intervals along the wall, each glowing with the Enclave's symbol, an emblem of clouds and wings with a pair of eyes gazing out from the shelter of an arch, green and purple on black.

We moved quietly, holding each other by the tails, Calamity taking the lead. My hindleg made walking unpleasant and a bit difficult. Fortunately, sneaking through the bowels of the *Overcast* didn't require me to run.

I felt awkward and uncomfortably warm with Regina Grimfeathers biting my tail. I tried to focus forward, and immediately regretted it. It tasted like Calamity hadn't washed his tail in weeks. (I knew that couldn't actually be true. Velvet Remedy would never stand for it. But that didn't change anything.) I fought a slowly losing battle against my gag reflex.

I survived about five minutes and two floors, waiting until we reached a secluded stairwell, before I had to spit my friend's tail out and dry heave in a corner.

I felt Regina spit out my own tail, snarking, "Yeah, like yours was a picnic."

If I was beginning to understand the *Overcast's* guidance scheme, the striping that flanked the metal stairs suggested we were midway between the barracks and the *Overcast's* medical bay, with a longer path towards the officers' quarters. I would have expected such a stairwell to be in heavy use, but it was utterly empty.

"Hang on here, Li'lpip," Calamity ordered. "Ah'll go round me up some Enclave armor. The barracks are on the floor below, opposite the rec center."

We had skirted what Calamity referred to as the rec center on our way to the stairwell, getting a good look at it through a set of large observation windows. It was a large, three-story open room filled with mares and stallions exercising, lifting weights and even flying through obstacle hoops, all out of armor and uniform. A third of the room was a cloudball court, and there had been nearly two dozen sweaty Enclave mares and stallions faced off in a friendly game. I'll admit, watching some of those mares temporarily distracted me from the concentrated disgusting in my mouth.

Made sense that the ponies down there had suits of armor nearby. But…

"Alone? Into a barracks?" Reggie asked, echoing my concern before I had fully formed it. But then she added, "How 'bout we just wait fer the next Enclave bastard t' come down these stairs an' take 'im out? I'll use Kage's knives, real quick and quiet."

"No," I insisted, taken aback. Fighting the Enclave in battle was one thing. But that? That was murder.

"Muh brother needs t' be put down, yes," Calamity said sternly. "But most o' these ponies ain't evil. They're jus' followin' orders. We ain't killin' anypony we don't have t'."

"None of these ponies are innocent," Reggie hissed.

"Some o' these ponies might be," Calamity countered. "Ah don't recall the *Overcast* gettin' directly involved in the fightin' anywhere yet."

"That's not how we do things," I added, only for Reggie to scoff.

"Oh please," Reggie repudiated, "I'm a child of Gawd, remember? I know all 'bout what you did at Shattered Hoof. You're an assassin when it suits your cause."

I flinched. I really, really didn't want to think of myself that way, but Regina was right. And I deserved the sucker-punch to my self-image to knock me off my pedestal.

Still mentally smarting, I changed tactic, "Okay, you're right. But so is Calamity. We've already seen crew rebellions. There's a chance that many of these ponies would side with us, giving half a chance and a touch of perspective."

"But they sure as hell won't if ya start slittin' their throats in the stairwell."

Reggie seemed to accept this. She fell silent.

I moved amongst a few Enclave crates stored beneath the stairwell and laid down, beginning to drift asleep. Calamity, I assumed, moved off to fetch the armor. I couldn't really tell, but it was a safe assumption. But either way, he and Regina weren't arguing or bringing up unpleasant points of morality anymore. Peace and quiet. Time for a nap.

Too quiet.

"Rainbow," I whispered.

"Dash."

⁂

I woke up when Calamity returned with the Enclave armor and, if I were to guess, most of the medical bay.

"Went smoothly," he said, slipping off the zebra stealth cloak and passing it to me. I reached out for it and realized I could see my arm. The MG StealthBuck II had drained while I slept. Fortunately, nopony (or, at least, nopony observant) had used the stairwell since then.

Wait. "How long was I out?"

"Long 'nuff fer him t' make a few trips," Reggie teased from someplace nearby. "Figured we ought t' let you sleep." Reggie shifted her attention to Calamity. "Don'tcha think your brother's gonna notice his whole damn ship is missin'?"

I would have sworn one of the Goddesses had a love of ironic timing. Before Calamity could answer, we heard a door open several floors above us. Music flooded into the stairwell, hidden speakers coming alive at their entrance, pouring haunting orchestral music with an exquisite cello performance as its centerpiece.

"Aw hell," Calamity moaned softly. "It's Autumn." At my querying look, he explained, "Who else would have the whole ship rigged t' pipe classical music wherever he goes?" I noticed that he positioned himself, wings spread, so that he would feel if Reggie tried to pass him. I wasn't sure if he intended to stop the griffin or just wanted forewarning.

Voices echoed down the stairwell.

"Again, sir, my deepest apologies," the mare said, almost whining. "I still can't understand how that monster got past us."

"Teleportation, no doubt," Autumn Leaf replied, his tone hard. "Two of those beasts that tried to breach Neighvarro a few years back were teleporters." He added, "That little spell proved no help to either of them."

"Sir, you know this is a trap," a mare's voice was saying.

"Of course it is a trap," a stallion's voice replied smooth as glass. Unlike Calamity's other brothers, there was no trace of his family's accent. "Red Eye is calling me out. There is simply no other explanation for that…" Autumn Leaf's voice twisted in a snarl, "…mental violation."

My head was spinning. Unless I was gravely misinterpreting what I was hearing, I hadn't been the only one that Red Eye's alicorns had "tested" with that vile mental *rape.*

Autumn Leaf sternly announced, "I do not intend to disappoint him."

I now understood what pushed Autumn Leaf to jump the whistle.

"Sir?" the mare pleaded, their voices drawing closer, "With all due respect, I believe it will be a grave error for you to enter the battle yourself like this."

"I do not doubt it," responded the pegasus who had brought so much harm and devastation and death to the Equestrian Wasteland. "But there are some transgressions that absolutely require a personal reckoning."

I heard another door open above us.

"If I die," Colonel Autumn Leaf instructed, "Or I am taken hostage, you have your orders." His voice receded as the two ponies walked away. I barely caught him add, "Besides, Red Eye is *not* going to see *this* coming…"

The door slid shut. When it closed, the virtual classical orchestra evaporated, plunging the stairwell into an oppressive silence.

"Rainbow?" I asked cautiously.

There was no Dash.

⁂

I listened to my earbloom as I drank another of the healing potions Calamity had pilfered, blinking away blood-tinged tears. My headache and horn-ache receded, then disappeared completely. At least we were going into this magically restored to complete health. Even the swelling in my leg was almost completely gone.

Canterlot static from the *Raptor Lenticular* was still flooding the Enclave inter-warship channel. The fact that the *Lenticular* had managed to neither shut down its com array nor get far enough away for the *Overcast* to be outside its range suggested that the Enclave aboard had not been successful in dealing with the "demon". I was willing to bet at least one of the other Raptors were trying to hunt the *Lenticular* down; but without communications, there was no easy way for them to coordinate efforts. I pictured

Enclave soldiers flying between ships, relaying messages.

I had switched away from the channel as soon as I had heard it, but the concentrated blast of Canterlot static had still taken its toll. Now I was switching through other transmissions: the Enclave's hellhound-control broadcast, the intra-ship classical music station (all cello, all the time), Red Eye's broadcast (straight from the Cathedral, sans towers and thus free from Enclave takeover) and finally the normal wasteland broadcast (all Enclave, *almost* all the time).

Still no sign or sound of Reggie. It had been fifteen minutes.

"Ah got a few ice-cold Sparkle~Colas in the rucksack over there," Calamity pointed. "That's almost good as another couple hours o' sleep, Ah reckon." He turned to the Enclave crates under the stairs, opening the first unlocked one. "Oooh," he whistled. "Grenades!"

I began to dig through the sack in question as the dour tones of fancy horns and kettle drums played in my ear. "You really need a PipBuck," I whispered to Calamity with a chuckle. In his kleptomaniac enthusiasm, he had dumped the contents of who knew how many medical boxes and Enclave crates into his saddle bags and even more into military rucksacks. "If for the inventory sorter alone."

The song on the radio changed. The new one was heavy on the string section.

"Ah shoot," Calamity said, facehoofing his armor-clad hoof against his helmet with a thunk. "The armor's got one o' those." Clearly, it had been a while since he'd properly used Enclave armor. The few times I'd seen him use his own suit, with the exception of a brief stint in Old Olneigh, he'd always had the helmet off.

I smirked, about to say something witty, when I found the ice-cold Sparkle~Cola. And, beside it, a couple tins of Mint-als. I stared, feeling a moment of cold shock.

"Calamity," I asked, trying to sound casual, "Did you even look at the stuff you were taking?"

"Nope," he said. I could almost feel his grin through the helmet. He had no idea what I'd just seen. "Reckon if Autumn wants it, best I have it."

Right. I looked back into the rucksack, my mind insisting on replaying the taste of Party-Time Mint-als, the feelings of competence and intelligence, the certainty…

I took the ice-cold Sparkle-Cola in my teeth and telekinetically zipped the rucksack shut, the little pony in my head echoing Calamity.

Nope.

I got to mentally celebrate my little victory for about a minute before I heard a door open below us. A pair of lightly-armed Enclave officers strode by, trotting up the stairs. Calamity whisked his scorpion-like armored tail around in a salute. One of the officers saluted back.

I watched them disappear up the metal stairs, following the line that led towards the officer's quarters without even noticing it. Once they were well away, I shifted my attention back to Calamity. "Got a question for you," I said as I opened the frosty Sparkle~Cola, enjoying the little fizzy hiss it made and the aroma of carrots and colaness.

"All right," he said, alleviating another crate of its cargo (which in this case included somepony's *Wingboner Magazine* collection, three hot plates, seventeen pre-war bits and a copy of the pre-war book *Give Peas a Chance: the Vegetarian's Guide to Cooking*).

"Shoot."

Remembering Reggie's snide remark about carrying healing potions, I started to telekinetically fill my saddlebags with a healthy supply from the rucksack.

"What kinds of defenses does the Enclave have around the S.P.P. Central Hub?" I questioned before tipping back the cola and taking a swig. (Yay, carrots!) I knew that the hub itself had defenses – the most significant being the shield surrounding the entire structure – but those were not under the Enclave's control. The Single Pegasus Project was the core of the Enclave's grip on the heavens. Even if nopony could get inside the central hub, I had to assume the Enclave had guards or at least some kind of warning system.

"Ya mean Neighvarro?" Calamity asked.

I almost choked on the taste of fizzy carrots. The healing potion I'd been levitating hit the floor. "Neighvarro?" I asked back slowly, setting the cola safely on one of the Enclave crates.

"Sonuva…!" Calamity nickered, giving a stomp.

"That's yer plan?" he asked, spreading his wings. "Ya wanna take on the Enclave's biggest military base?!"

Oh fuck.

"The base with a Thunderhead permanently parked overhead?"

Fuckity-fuck.

"The base where muh *father* serves as drill sergeant?"

Luna shove my cunt full of moonrocks and call me home. The Enclave had built a whole damn base around it!

"Stealth mission?" he asked, his voice betraying the ludicrousness of my idea, "Or were ya just plannin' on a full frontal assault?"

I opened my muzzle to reply, but all that came out was a squeak.

"Ayep. This is gonna be barrels o' fun."

He would have said more, but the sound of another door opening prompted him to clam up. We both waited, listening, striving to hear whether or not the pony or ponies who just entered the stairwell were heading our way. Our ears were greeted only with silence.

Moments later, we heard Reggie's muffled hiss. "Dash."

Calamity's wings drooped. "Muh brother?" he asked, hesitating to speak further.

"Still alive, I'm afraid," Reggie admitted. "Sorry. I got distracted."

Distracted?

"I found they've got prisoners in here," Reggie explained. "Anypony up for breakin' 'em free?"

Calamity chuckled. "Welcome t' the team."

* * *

One pegasus in Enclave armor on a ship full of Enclave pegasi, flanked by two invisible and virtually inaudible companions. If we couldn't pull this off, we didn't deserve to win.

The Enclave music in my earbloom had changed again. This one sounded like a dirge.

"Howdy, partner," Calamity called out jovially as he trotted up to the mare at the guard station outside the ship's brig. I so wanted to facehoof. "Bored yet?"

"Hover and identify," the guard pegasus ordered rotely.

"Windsheer," Calamity lied swiftly, "Superior Communications Officer. Transferred from the *Glorious Dawn* last week."

That was a dangerous gamble. If the mare knew about the Colonel's family, using his brother's name and rank would give his story a sense of legitimacy. After all, it was understandable that Colonel Autumn Leaf might want his brothers on his ship for this operation. And Calamity's accent lent credence to the claim.

Would she buy a Superior Communications Officer wearing Enclave armor rather than an officer's uniform? I had to trust Calamity's instincts and Enclave experience on that. However, if she knew what Autumn Leaf's brothers looked like, then not only would any glimpse beneath that armor tell her that Calamity was lying, but she would know his palette matched one of Autumn's *other* brothers – the one who was branded a traitor. The one that the Enclave was to kill on sight. Calamity's ruse could put the mare in the perfect frame of mind to guess his actual identity.

"Superior Communications Officer?" the mare asked, immediately rendering my worries pointless. "So maybe you can tell me what the hay is going on with *Raptor Lenticular.*" She gave Calamity an exasperated look. "I mean, we've got the ship's tag, right? And even if the infiltrators managed to take it out, we've got the tags for every pony in a suit of armor on board. Why don't we just find the damn Raptor and blow it out of the sky?"

"Cuz we have Raptors to spare, right?" Calamity chided as he trotted up to the mare. "The ship ain't turned about t' attack us yet, an' I reckon that means there's still hope our forces will keep control. As fer trackin' it down? My bits are on the infiltrators not actually havin' the channel fer our communications."

The control for the door had a cloud interface and required a code. Reggie and I teamed up to hack it, her talons and my savvy, while Calamity kept the guard mare busy.

He shook his carapace-helmeted head. "Nope, much more likely they're blasting that necro-noise broadband, flooding out every signal comin' from the *Lenticular.* Jammin' the tags." Calamity whinnied. "Hell, that might be the whole point, an' screwin' up our comms is jus' icing on the cupcake."

The password was "Fluffykins". I wasn't sure what to think of that.

"So, is the demon really, well, a demon?" the mare asked. "I heard rumor that it's a monster released from hell by the balefire bombs."

"Ah don't believe in demons," Calamity replied. "No more than Ah believe in goddesses. Way Ah see it, we don't need outside forces t' blame fer makin' the world a shittier place. We do that well enough by our own hooves…"

I positioned myself behind the mare and slipped off my hood, giving Calamity a signal. Reggie entered the code while Calamity kept the guard's attention. There was the faintest whirr as the lock cycled; our pegasus friend moved up to the mare, speaking more loudly to cover the sound.

"…Ah'm sure the so-called demon ain't nothing more than a pony," he said in a tone that suggested what he was saying was more than just his opinion: it was the Enclave line, and the mare was expected to believe it. "Or some monster twisted up by the byproducts of the war."

Reggie and I slid inside the brig.

Before us was a corridor of cells, two floors high, each cell behind a glowing blue force-field identical to the magical energy cages the Enclave had thrown Ditzy Doo, Calamity and me into less than a week ago. The sound of weeping drifted through the air.

Most of the cells were empty. Most. There were ponies here, not just bucks and mares but foals too. Some prisoners paced in their cells, others huddled on hard metal cots. They were from the wasteland; they looked filthy compared to the stark cleanliness of the Enclave vessel. I recoiled as I found the source of the crying, a mare cradling a foal, the colt's body limp in her hooves, having died in captivity.

There were two guards inside, standing at a rear airlock, and they both reacted to the door. "I thought I heard something," one of them said as they moved from their positions, looking about.

I shifted, moving out of the way as one passed me, his tail swishing inches from me. Part of me wanted to draw out Little Macintosh and shoot him in the head, point blank. He deserved no less. But the noise could draw the whole ship down on us. I wished I had Velvet Remedy with her anesthetic spell with us, or Life Bloom, or Xenith with her paralyzing hoofstrikes. In their absence, I did the next best thing.

My horn glowed, giving away my position, as I wrapped my telekinesis about their necks and squeezed until they stopped struggling.

Reggie pulled back her hood and gave one of the limp guards a kick. "Help me disable these energy fields."

I pulled mine off too, choosing to have faith that we could trust the prisoners to not give us away, and moved to the control terminal for the cells.

As Reggie and I began to work, I couldn't help but comment, "If it makes any difference, I'm proud of you. You chose to help these ponies over your revenge."

Regina Grimfeathers squawked a laugh. "Ain't your approval I'm aimin' fer, but thank you anyhoo." At my curious look, she sighed. "Kage's. Wherever my brother is now, I want his approval. An' this is what I think he'd want me t' do. What I think he'd do in my place."

My mind flashed to the young male griffin buying a bent tin can from Silver Bell just to make her happy. "I think you're right," I offered. "I mean, I know I didn't know him long. But from what I did see of him, yes, he would."

Reggie nodded. "Revenge ain't worth anythin' if I dishonor his memory in the process."

She looked at me, a small tear in one eye. "He was always wantin' t' do stuff like this, you know. Me too, of course," she hastily added, "But I wanted t' be the hero. He jus' wanted t' make somethin' better o' the griffins' role in Equestria." She smiled bleakly. "Sometimes, I think he took Stern an' her lot as a personal affront, an' wanted t' try t' balance things out."

"You!" one of the prisoners called out. I rotated towards the voice and saw Tracker. The jade pegasus slammed his forehooves against the energy field, ignoring the feedback. "This isn't how things are supposed to be! Get out while you still can. Before they get you too!"

"Not without taking all of you with us," I said with a determined smile. More ponies were getting up, moving to the edges of the magical barriers, staring at Reggie and me with mixed expressions of hope and disbelief. "Welcome to your rescue."

The sound of klaxons filled the brig. I spun to Reggie, eyes wide, certain that somepony had triggered an alarm, and we were about to be overwhelmed by Enclave soldiers.

Then we felt the first dull thuds vibrating through the floor. The brig was close to the *Overcast's* exterior (I had a terrible inkling that the airlock was for easy, high-altitude disposal of prisoners), and we could feel the impacts of what had to be the Cathedral's anti-aircraft cannons.

Reggie returned my gaze.

"We're heeeere."

* * *

I had never seen such disciplined and orderly chaos as the Enclave mobile siege platform in the heat of battle. Every pegasus knew where to go, what to do, and they were doing it rapidly under the barked orders of their commanders. With the military channel down, officers had taken wing, brushing the ceiling with the tips of their feathers as they shouted down to the troops, and across the ship to each other.

Nopony questioned the apparently lone Enclave soldier moving with purpose through the corridors and out into one of the *Overcast's* hangar bays, laden down with rucksacks.

"Where to, Li'lpip?" Calamity asked.

"You'll like this," I replied from beneath the zebra cloak. "You're going to steal one of the Enclave's sky-tanks."

"Good." I could almost hear the grin breaking across his face. "The Enclave owes us fer the *Sky Bandit.*"

"There's an exterior airlock we need t' pull up t' once we're free of the ship," Reggie added. "Got some extra passengers t' take aboard."

The entire ship flooded with the tense sound of brass, drums and violins, the heavier classical music replaced by the stirring battle anthem *Flight of the Shadowbolts.*

"This is it, ponies," the voice of Colonel Autumn Leaf boomed over the music. **"This is the moment all your training and all your experience has prepared you for. This is the battle you were *born* for. It's time to separate the pegasi from the griffins. It's time to kick Red Eye's ass, and teach him that crossing the Enclave, murdering our brothers and sisters, was his *ultimate* folly.**

"We fight in the name of every pegasus ignominiously massacred in the Splendid Valley sneak attack…" The monitors along the walls came to life, the Enclave emblem replaced by a slowly scrolling names in red – every pegasus killed by the Splendid Valley balefire bomb. I forced myself not to look, not to read each name. I knew I should. I was responsible… but if I did, I also knew, I wouldn't be able to go on. **"…We fight in the name of our loved ones, our home and our Enclave!"**

As we made our way across the hangar deck towards one of the black-and-green armored tanks, the *Flight of the Shadowbolts* began to crescendo. The hangar door growled open to the smoky yellow sky. Explosions of black smoke pockmarked the haze as anti-aircraft shells filled the sky.

A squad of pegasi in black carapace armor shot past the opening, embattled with a wing of dark green, shield-protected alicorns. I could hear the sounds of magical energy discharges and automatic gunfire from the world below mixing into a nerve-wracking din. The first sky-tanks and bombing chariots took off, flying out of the throat of the ship and into the heart of the war.

Calamity opened the largest sky-tank we could find, one with multiple plasma cannons (the kind like the one Calamity had shot Topaz with, too big for even a battle saddle) and space for a dozen armored soldiers. He pushed himself to the front, strapping himself into the flight harness while Reggie and I took up places in the back. I noted the name stenciled onto the side of the sky-tank just before climbing aboard: *Tortoise.*

A pair of Enclave soldiers came trotting up to the back of the *Tortoise,* their helmets in their muzzles. They had seen Calamity strapping in and were expecting a ride. Reggie tossed back her hood, becoming visible for just a moment, grinning as I closed the door on them. “Sorry, bucks. This one’s taken.”

Their stunned expressions were priceless.

“Go now,” I told Calamity, tossing back my own hood the moment the door was shut. I looked over the door, the pony in my head panicking as I realized I had no idea how to lock it. “Now. Now is good. Go now!” I didn’t want to give the two bucks time to recover, open the door, and gun us down.

Calamity spread his wings inside the armored enclosure of the *Tortoise’s* cockpit, pumping twice, and I felt the tank lift from the hangar floor.

A moment later, we were shooting out the hanger door, the horizontal slit windows of the *Tortoise* glowing with the sickly golden light of Everfree’s dawn.

Beneath us was a massive complex of metal, stone and brown concrete: the Cathedral. High in its center rose an airy gothic structure of steepled roofs, flying buttresses and rosy stained glass. Ringing out around it was a heavily fortified castle – thick walls, towers, battlements. Tower strongholds held anti-aircraft guns identical to the ones that had once protected Friendship City. There was even a moat, and I could see the shadow of something the size of three dozen ponies swimming about in it.

Beyond the castle’s outer walls and moat, the Everfree Forest was nothing but blackened ash and severed stumps for at least a mile in every direction. A deep gorge knifed through the land on three sides, spanned by only a single, fortress-like bridge.

The scorched land was filled with ponies. Not just dozens, not just hundreds. Thousands of ponies wearing Red Eye’s colors were engaging the Enclave in a ferocious battle. Red Eye’s troops fought from trenches and pillboxes, more soldiers lined the walls of the castle, pouring bullets into the sky. Red Eye’s alicorns and griffins met the pegasi in the skies.

It still seemed like a horribly lopsided battle. Bombing wagons rained high-explosives down on the fortress from high enough above to be out of range. The Raptors alone could level the Cathedral with concentrated fire. Goddesses knew what the *Overcast* itself could do.

Two of the Raptors from the *Overcast* had joined four more, encircling the Cathedral, bombarding it with heavy plasma fire. (I assumed the third Raptor was busy hunting *Raptor Lenticular.*) Three of the Raptors were showing signs of damage from the shelling, one of them was smoking badly and had begun to cant, drifting out of position.

Calamity circled us around, deftly keeping us out of the line of heavy fire. We drew up to the brig airlock. Tracker already had it open, waiting for us. I opened the door of the *Tortoise* as Calamity backed us up to the *Overcast*. The Thunderhead siege platform was barely moving now; jumping from it to our sky-tank would be more nerve-wracking than actually dangerous. I moved into position to help them; Regina climbed into the seat for one of the plasma cannons.

The first pony, a light grey mare with a shockingly purple mane, moved up to the edge of the airlook. She gulped, her knees shaking, her brow beading with the effort not to look down.

"It's okay," I coaxed. "You can do it."

Our attention, and the attention of every pony in the battle, was suddenly wrenched downward by a horrific, Equestria-shaking bellow. Something huge, dark and horrifying rose up from the Cathedral, a black and monstrous shape against the smoke-filtered sun. Great, angry red eyes poured hatred down on us as it brutalized the air with massive, leathery wings.

Then it moved towards one of the Raptors, bellowing balefire. As it moved, I could make out pony-sized claws and spines and the two-tone green of its scales, marred by deep scars that looked more surgical than battle-borne. I glimpsed an odd, mechanical glow coming from inside one of the wounds which hadn't fully healed.

There was a dragon in the Everfree Forest. And not just any dragon, the Luna-fucking granddaddy of all dragons. An ancient dragon so old it must have already been a huge, gigantic, terrifying, enormous, totally all-grown-up dragon back when Spike was only a *baby!*

And it was fighting on Red Eye's side.

The dragon roared again, grasping the Raptor in its claws as three of the others turned their weapons towards it. Dragon-killers, Calamity had called them. Well, this was their chance to prove themselves worthy of the title. The dragon blasted the captive Raptor with choking black smoke, then howled as the other Raptors lanced it with bright pastel beams of magical energy. It flicked its tail, producing massive spikes that glowed with eldritch energy, and lashed out at one of the attacking Raptors, cutting deep grooves in its forward armor.

My jaw hit the floor of the *Tortoise*. Those spikes were magically enhanced. I stared at the dragon's unnatural, glowing-red eyes and knew immediately who they reminded me of.

"Red Eye. Cybernetically. Enhanced. A *DRAGON!*"

I blinked, the little pony in my head petrified. Then spun. "Okay, that's it. We're getting down there *right now!"* I called out, wrapping the escaping prisoner ponies in my magic and floating them unceremoniously into the *Tortoise*. "Calamity, get us the fuck out of this sky!"

I closed the door, apologizing to the prisoners as I pulled myself into another of the plasma cannon chairs. The chair and controls were made for a larger pony, and I had about as much skill with magical energy weapons as I did with swordfighting, but as long as I didn't manage to shoot the damn tank we were in, I figured even I could help.

Reggie was already firing, taking shots at other sky-tanks and Enclave bombing chariots. The high-pitched yelp of her plasma cannon was making my ears hurt.

"Oh YEAH!" Reggie shouted over the cacophony as one of her shots turned an Enclave bombing wagon into a cascading explosion of rainbow pyrotechnics. She was already swinging towards her next target before the fireworks had subsided. "I love me this turtle!"

"Tortoise," I corrected as I linked my PipLeg into the turret, downloading the sky-tank's tag and maximizing the value of my targeting spell.

"Whatever," she said with a dismissive wave of her wing. "Hey, Calamity. C'n we keep it?" Her next three shots took out two carapace-armored Enclave pegasi, freeing up a very surprised-looking alicorn.

Some of Red Eye's troops along the Cathedral wall opened fire on the *Tortoise* as Calamity brought us close. I gasped in dismay as two of the escapees crumpled, dead, crimson flowers bursting across their bodies. Several of the other escapees screamed. The more level-headed ponies stepped in, trying to prevent a panic. Tracker belted out a command ordering everyone to lay flat on the floor and make themselves as small a target as possible. I floated open one of the rucksacks filled with medical supplies as I looked around the interior of the tank.

The bullets hadn't penetrated the tank's armor so much as ignored it completely. There weren't even bullet holes. Red Eye's troops were using bullets enchanted with an armor bypass!

I turned my plasma cannon on the troops along the wall, trying to clear a path for us to land without losing any more ponies. Suddenly, between that and the dragon, this battle was looking a whole lot less lopsided.

The dragon roared overhead.

* * *

The noise of the battle outside barely disturbed the almost pietistic atmosphere of the Cathedral's central building. The buildings surrounding it had proven to be barracks and military training grounds, now emptied as this half of Red Eye's army engaged the Enclave invaders. The other half, the larger half as I learned from a few hacked terminals, were amassing in Fillydelphia. In just a few days, the Fillydelphia Ruins was going to become the site of the biggest battle in Equestria since (and possibly before) the pony-zebra war.

And thousands of innocents were going to die in the crossfire, or be exterminated by the Enclave, if I didn't manage to stop it.

We had left the escapees in one of those barracks, instructing them to barricade themselves inside until we returned. I couldn't help but think we had taken them from the proverbial frying pan into the equally proverbial fire, but there simply wasn't *anyplace* in Everfree that was truly safe. Except maybe Zecora's Hut, and I was sorely tempted to have Calamity fly them there while I pressed ahead. But my gut told me we didn't have time for anything else. Once I freed the unicorns Red Eye intended to sacrifice in his damned ascension, we would need to leave very swiftly. I was already planning on levitating the lot of them in tow while Calamity flew the *Tortoise* as fast as he could go. With any luck, it would be the speediest flying tortoise in history.

The trio of us snuck through the Cathedral. Calamity had left the Enclave armor in the *Tortoise* and was back under a zebra stealth cloak. This time, it was Reggie who walked around visible. There were enough Talon griffins in Red Eye's forces that nopony gave her a second look.

"Okay, this is kinda creeping me out," she admitted as she strode by a squad of Red Eye's soldiers who were running to garrison part of the building, one of them stopping to smile and wave to her as they passed.

We passed under an archway. Carved into the stone was the message: Equality is Harmony.

Robed ponies strode casually past us, humming a low tune and paying Regina no attention at all.

We saw two more up ahead, admiring one of the many pinkish stained-glass windows. A third walked up to join them, my ears catching the phrase, "Walk in the Blessings of Unity." The other robed ponies parroted the hail.

"That's Discord," the new arrival told the other two. "The Spirit of Disharmony." Her voice carried the authoritative tones of a professional know-it-all. "Red Eye was so impressed on his visit to Canterlot that he imported all the windows used in the Cathedral from the old Royal Palace."

I stared at the window, ignoring the monster depicted and instead focusing on the pinkish tones of the glass itself. A surge of dread hit me as I realized that all the windows in the Cathedral were suffused with Pink Cloud. My little pony conjured up imaginings of the windows slowly leaking minute amounts of necromantic poison into the building.

"Never heard of him," one of the robed ponies asked. "What happened to him?"

"Noooo pony knooooows," the pony teased. Then straightened up. "No, really. Princess Celestia and Luna defeated him and turned him into a statue. He was still in Canterlot when the Apocalypse happened. Some say the attack on Canterlot woke him up, only for the Pink Cloud to prove as lethal to spirits as it was to the Princesses. Some say he has been a statue all this time, in which case he was probably destroyed when the Enemy obliterated the Canterlot Ruins…"

"And some say," the third blurted out, "that Discord was released by the war, but he was so weakened that he's now just an itty-bitty spirit running around the Equestrian Wasteland putting ammo and bottlecaps into random containers!" She grinned. Then paused, tapping her muzzle. "Or… was that the Ghost of Pinkie Pie?"

The other two ponies stared at her blankly for a moment, then burst into giggles. "Icicle, you're so random!"

Up ahead was another huge archway with wide-open sainted glass doors, another bon mot from Red Eye engraved into the stonework, inlaid with bronze: Remember, you are not here because you are better than those who are not, but because you are better than who you were.

Beyond was the main theatre of the Cathedral, a voluminous room of pillars, high arches and towering windows of dazzling stained glass. The room was filled with robed ponies sitting in pews, their attentions on a mare standing at a pulpit.

"Do not be alarmed, my fellow Disciples of the New Unity," she was saying. "Let not your heart feel dismay as we hear the roars and rumbles of the violence that surrounds us like a storm. Instead, rejoice. We have come to this place through fire and darkness. But today is the day we have all be waiting for. Today, is the day of Red Eye's ascension, and the birth of the New Unity!"

I felt like I'd been hit by lightning. Today? Red Eye's going to try to become a god *today?* Now? In the middle of all of this?

"Remember, Disciples, as you hear the screams and the thunder of weapons outside these halls, that Red Eye has told us from the very beginning that this day would be born just as we all were, covered in blood. That…" she pointed towards one of the towering windows as the passing dark shape of the dragon turned the majestic stained glass to shadowed greys. "…is not to be feared, but to be loved. That is a sign of our salvation! The dragon came to Red Eye weak, blind, dying of old age. And Red Eye gave him new life. And like the dragon, soon, we will all be reborn!"

Reggie pulled out a cigarette and lit it. "We are so fucked."

I turned, knowing that there was a stairwell near here. We needed to go down. "This way," I said as I spotted a familiar-looking tapestry.

I led them into a side hall that connected the chapel to the Cathedral's school and nursery wing. Through open doors on either side of us, we could see the workrooms where the Disciples of the New Unity were creating schoolbooks and educational materials for the new schools that Red Eye intended to establish all across Equestria. The rooms reminded me severely of the Ministry of Image.

The doors to the school wing opened, several robed ponies herding a gaggle of colts and fillies, most of whom sounded more excited than frightened. Several of the children, I saw with sick alarm, were wearing alicorn costumes.

"But we wanna see the battle!" one little colt protested. "We wanna see the good guys win!"

"We already know Red Eye will win," the adult intoned. "It has been ordained. Now move along. Red Eye wants you all safe in the shelter." Another of the adult ponies was opening a side door leading to descending stone steps. That was the door we wanted. That should take us down to… cybersurgery? No, no, that was sublevel… two, I thought. What was sublevel one?

The colt whined. "We knoooow it's ordated. But we wanna seeeee it!"

"Down that way," I told Reggie. "As soon as the children are through."

The adolescent griffin turned a gaze towards the emptiness of my invisible direction. "How is it that you know where we're supposed to go?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "Have you been here before? Seen a map?"

"Sort of," I admitted. "I'm working off fragmented memories I caught during my alicorns' telepathic skull-fuck." Oh, the nostalgia I had for the innocent days of Stable Two when I didn't even know what skull-fuck meant, much less had a reason to apply the term to an experience of my own.

"Ugh… Well, I'm glad something good… came… of it." *Not* a pun I needed. But at least Reggie had the good grace to wince.

The music in my earbloom erupted in a painful blast of static. I nearly tore it from my ear. I was immediately thankful that I did not, as the next sound I heard was possibly the most wonderful sound in the Equestrian Wasteland.

"Gooooooood morning, children!"

DJ Pon3! Homage was okay!

Or, at least, she was okay when this was recorded. Knowing her, the broadcast was rigged to occur hours after she had left. As Watcher had said, she wasn't making it easy for the Enclave.

> *"I interrupt the Enclave's depressing-ass music for a very special broadcast. Today, I have with me two members of the Wasteland Resistance, none other than the Enclave-fighting duo of Lion & Mouse. And I'll be speaking with them about the good fight, the blows they have struck to the Enclave, and what everypony can do to lend a hoof. But first, the weather!"*

I drank in her voice. Disguised as it was, it was still her. I could hear my Homage, feel her presence, behind every single word.

My heart stirred, taking strength yet splitting with sorrow. Never again…

I'd never see, feel, smell my Homage again.

Oh Goddesses, I pled under my breath, my body beginning to shake. *Please don't let that be true! I do anything, give anything. Please, just give me this one thing!*

DJ Pon3's voice, a miracle in the fire and the darkness, continued to break through.

> *"Completely cloudy, with a chance of big, black Thunderheads over the Everfree Forest and the valley between Manehattan and Fillydelphia. I predict one of those two cities is in for some really nasty weather very, very soon. So if you're in the… *BZZZZZZTCHK!*"*

The signal went dead. No DJ Pon3. No music. Nothing. The Enclave had shut the broadcast down completely.

My heart stopped. I stood frozen. Paralyzed…

…until the Cathedral shook under a mighty, rending rumble. The crippled Raptor had finally lost any semblance of control and was crashing into one of the battlements outside, gouging out an avalanche of sundered stone. The Raptor's storm clouds dissipating in a hurricane blast that shattered the nearby windows into razor shards and fine pink dust. I instinctively lashed out with my telekinesis, pushing back at the debris, keeping it away from us and from the children, terrified at the consequences of breathing powdered Pink Cloud glass.

The children screamed and no longer needed coaxing to go down the stairs. We swiftly followed.

⁂

The first sublevel beneath the chapel was dedicated to bypass spells and weaponry. The archway we had just passed beneath read: Productivity is the right of every pony.

Here, Red Eye's disciples had enchanted almost a thousand firearms for his army. Like the barracks, these rooms were empty now save for the occasional guard or passerby, none of whom gave Reggie more than a second look.

> *"Just because a pony is born with wings or a horn does not make them inferior."*

Red Eye's voice played in my earbloom, part of an audio log stamped with the logo of Stable 101. I had spotted it amongst a stack of books on a shelf just inside the archway.

The audio log was apparently part of a recorded discussion between Red Eye and the Overmare of Stable 101, a remnant of his past that someone from the Stable had deemed to save. The debate was taking place over dinner at what sounded like a crowded table. The munching of food and the clinking of plates and glasses created a constant background din, and occasionally the voices of others at the table murmured into my ear, making it hard to pick out what Red Eye or the Overmare was saying.

> *"The first Griffinchaser was designed and built by an earth pony in a matter of minutes,"* the Overmare countered silkily.
>
> *"The entire town of Appleloosa was created by earth ponies in less than a year. Do you honestly think unicorns or pegasi could have taken us from muskets to machine guns in just a few decades?"*

As we walked, I looked around, trying to shake loose memories of where to go next. Unfortunately, few if any alicorns had been on this level during their assault on my mind.

> *"Unicorns and pegasi have their own special talents which they bring to the table,"* this younger-sounding Red Eye countered.
>
> *"For example, without unicorns, we wouldn't have healing potions. Without the pegasi, Equestria would have been ravaged by wild weather. Each race of ponykind adds to the whole, no one greater or more important than the others. It is a vital gestalt, requiring all three. It is wrong for earth ponies to set themselves up above the others."*

Above us, the Cathedral was rocked by a succession of heavy explosions. The stone ceiling tiles cracked, dust raining down. Reggie looked up, guessing, "One of the bombing wagons. Much more of that, and they might punch through."

> *"Magic,"* the Overmare chuckled.
>
> *"Let me tell you a little about pony magic. As it so happens, there was a particularly magical earth pony in my ancestry. His name was Joe, and he worked in Canterlot as a craftsman making coffee cups. Though he was no unicorn and knew no spells, the coffee cups he crafted would always be clean, they would never stain, and it took tremendous force to make them chip or crack. Why? Because making these cups was a labor of love, and that natural earth pony magic infused each of his creations."*

We reached a locked door. No cloud controls this time. Just a good, old-fashioned tumbler lock. Seeing it made me absurdly happy, and I telekinetically picked it before I realized I intended to.

I opened the door, hoping for a stairwell down. And instead found a storeroom. Full of assault carbines, shotguns, ammo and more. Calamity looked like he had died and gone to heaven.

I sighed. "Take just what we can grab quickly…" Calamity became a flying rust and orange blur. "…and that won't slow us…" Calamity stopped in front of me, every single damned weapon slung about his body and an assault carbine in his mouth. I heard an impressed "wow" from Reggie.

"Wanph one?" he asked innocently. I went ahead and took the (slightly drooled-on) assault carbine and several magazines of ammo. It would be good to have a backup for Little Macintosh.

> *"First, the magic of pegasi and unicorns are flashy shortcuts to hard work; and without hard work, where is the drive for innovation? When has a pegasus or a unicorn ever needed to be creative? Second, the magic of pegasi and unicorns are selfish. The shortcuts they provide, the labor they save, is only for themselves. Whereas*

the innovations of earth ponies can be shared by all ponies and be built upon by future earth ponies.

"Finally, the magic of pegasi and unicorn ponies is demanding. I'd even say crippling. Where earth ponies can throw themselves directly into their work, the pegasi of the past needed flight camps, and the unicorns needed magical schooling just to be able to use the magic they had been born with. Time that could be spent learning other skills were spent instead mastering their magic.

"Not so with the earth ponies. Our magic is inherent, and innately applied to the work we do. While the unicorn's magic is spellcasting, and the pegasus' magic is impossible flight and prancing on clouds, our magic is to be superior at what we do. Earth ponies are inherently superior because ***that*** *is our* ***gift!****"*

"Hey," Reggie called out, standing at another door. "I think I've found the way down."

"Shortcuts," Red Eye offered smoothly, *"Are sometime useful. Critical, even. Sure, the earth pony way builds things that last, but it is a slow process, and sometimes you need a quick fix. Take, for example, poison. An earth pony may be able to test your blood, identify the poison and brew up an antidote. But all of that can take hours which you do not have. Isn't it better to have a unicorn on hoof who can cast a spell purging any poison away?"*

"Red Eye," the Overmare sighed drolly. *"I am not impressed with this new-found 'insight' you claim from your scouting missions. I speak in sweeping truths and you argue isolated examples. Exceptions that are not sufficient to disprove the rule. Now I…"*

The Overmare fell silent. There was a pregnant pause before the voice of the young Red Eye asked casually,

"Overmare? You were saying?"

Then, even more casually, he added, *"Is something wrong?"*

"I… why haven't…"

"Yes?" he prompted. *"I'm afraid I don't follow."*

The sounds around the dinner table died away. I imagined everypony was staring at Red Eye and the Overmare. I suspected the latter had suddenly gone alarmingly pale. Very softly, the Overmare murmured,

"…I just noticed that you haven't so much as tasted your drink…"

⁂

The Cathedral. Sublevel three. Cybersurgery. A plaque on the wall read: Until all of us can be free, none of us should be free.

The hall we had emerged into announced "Research and Surgery" in one direction, "Administration" in the other. Both paths seeming otherwise equal, I had chosen the former, suspecting that there was a fair chance of running across Red Eye himself in Administration. And that wasn't my goal. I was here for his prisoners. His sacrifices. Not him. I was more than happy to leave him to the Enclave.

I was regretting that decision now.

The smell of blood, spoiled meat and disinfectants hit my nostrils like a buck to the face, making me turn and gag. Reggie recoiled and I could hear the muffled sound of

Calamity's many, many guns clattering together as he staggered.

The walls of the surgical labs were a gleaming, disinfected white that made every flaw and discoloration and old stain stand out. The floor tiles were cold and felt unpleasantly damp.

There were highly advanced machines built into the walls and ceiling, half of which I couldn't even guess the purpose of. There were vats of strange liquid, and floating within them were a variety of cybernetics. My eyes took in a mechanical snake that resembled a pony's spine, a robotic leg that clearly wasn't for a pony, metal arms that could have been torn from a cleaning robot, and more esoteric devices – strings of wire ending in arcanotech baubles.

There were three exits. One was the way we came in, the hallway leading to the Administration section of the sublevel. The one opposite it led to the stairs down. The final door, directly across from me, was open to what the sign claimed was a "storage" room. Huge glass tubes displayed creatures and monsters, subjects of cybernetic experimentation. All were dead, many still splayed open from surgery. Everything from radroaches to manticores. There was even a hellhound. Or, at least, half of one. The left half.

At the back end of the room was a cast iron hatch marked "Disposal". Most of the stench was coming from that "storage" room. Only a little from the… meat… on several of the tables surrounding me.

"And how may I help you," the thing in front of us asked. It (he?) had been a pony once. But now he was more machine than flesh, the whole lower half of his body replaced by a robotic chassis that reminded me of the brain-bots in Ironshod Firearms. Mechanical arms, like those from the hovering spider-bots, each ending in a different tool or manipulator, flexed and moved about him, carrying out unspoken tasks of medicine and science.

It only saw Regina, but my heart began beating like a frightened rabbit's every time it looked my way.

Reggie flinched away as one of those arms moved towards her, probing. "N-nothing. I'm fine."

"Fine? Yes, I suppose," the creature said. "But you could be better." I felt myself cringe.

"Better?" Regina questioned skeptically. "Like you?"

"Indeed. You should have seen me before the grenade." The creature chuckled. "I know the looks take a bit to get used to, but ol' Doc Slaughter has never been better." Several of the arms paused in their tasks to wave. "And you can't imagine just how useful these are! Well, maybe *you* could, being a griffin." His chassis turned, extending one arm in particular, one that ended in mechanical talons. Reggie took an involuntary step back, looking repulsed.

Doctor Slaughter. I knew that name. *Oh, and tag her to see Doc Slaughter. She's got one of them leg terminals that are a bitch to get off.* He was in Fillydelphia. I narrowly avoided losing my PipBuck to him.

"You… created the cyberdragon, didn't you?" Reggie surprised me by asking.

"Oh yes. Possibly my best work," Doc Slaughter said proudly, his chassis spinning back as the arms scurried about their tasks. "A most unique opportunity. Poor thing's body was failing right out from under it. He was blind when Red Eye brought me to him, and he could barely fly, failing ticker. Red Eye offered the dragon new eyes, and more, for half his gems." He purred wistfully. "And just look at him now. Stronger, faster, more powerful and lethal than he was in his prime."

"If he wanted this new life so badly, why is he out there risking it?"

"My dear, you say that as if he might be harboring a death wish or something," Doc Slaughter said, the tracks on his chassis spinning, delivering him from one side of the lab to another. "But that's not the case at all. He simply has no other choice."

No other choice? Red Eye *enslaved* the dragon?

We heard explosions and the sounds of rapid-fire magical energy weapons. They sounded like they were coming from the floor above us.

"Red Eye wasn't going to have a creature that powerful and dangerous in the Everfree Forest without having it on a leash, you know," the cyber-doc explained, ignoring the battle that was quickly catching up to us. "So when we replaced the dragon's heart with a newer, better one, Red Eye had me install a matrix-disruption grenade in there with it. Red Eye sends a signal, the dragon turns off." The griffin-arm clanked its talons together. "Just like that."

"That's… horrible," Reggie gasped. "And really, really stupid. Now he has a super-powerful dragon who hates him."

"Hates him?" Doc Slaughter laughed. "Not at all. The dragon loves his new body. And Red Eye isn't foalish enough to abuse the situation. The dragon's cage is *very* gilded." Another explosion caused the lights to flicker and a few tiles to drop from the ceiling. This time, even the cyber-doc reacted. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to seal up this lab. I'm expecting a new patient, and we can't be disturbed."

Suddenly, dangerously familiar classical music began to pour through the intercoms. It was followed a moment later by Red Eye's voice. The voice of the older, Wasteland-hardened stallion I knew too well.

"Now that our esteemed guests have arrived, I thought I'd help make you feel at home. This is one of your favorites, right Autumn Leaf?" His tone was pleasant, as if the whole battle and all the pain and blood that came with it was nothing more than a rapping at the door. "I admire your taste, Autumn. May I call you Autumn? And I do agree that Octavia never played a more splendid and perfect recorded performance. Yes, I know her works well. Grew up with them."

In a softer, wry voice, he couldn't prevent himself from adding, "She was an earth pony, after all."

As we scurried to leave, the cyber-doc added, "He even let him keep all his gems!"

* * *

The Cathedral. Sublevel four. We were almost there. Almost where I was sure we needed to be. The markings on the doors labeled this level as "Meta-Pony Testing". The inscription over the main door read: We ascend together or we fail together.

The walls were a mottled brown stone that seemed to be secreting a thick layer of slime.

Reggie grimaced in disgust. "This place just gets worse and worse."

"Whatcha think that means, meta-pony testin'?" Calamity asked, his voice suggesting he knew the answer and really hoped he was wrong.

"I think it means exactly what you think it means," I answered gloomily.

There was only one way to go this time. And that was through a sealed vault door up ahead. An access terminal was mounted on the wall nearby. Once again, no clouds. Just regular, hackable goodness.

"The way you talked, I didn't think your stealth missions tended to go this smoothly," Regina commented, pulling out her guns and checking the loads. "I ain't complainin'. Jus', I'm 'fraid if I don't getta shoot somethin' soon, I'm gonna forget how."

Unity. The password was "unity". I felt cheated. He wasn't even trying.

Entering the password gave me access to the terminal's contents. The first option was to unlock the vault door and open it. But beneath that, I was surprised to see a number of scientific journal entries. Curiosity pushed me to glance at the first. The contents drove me to read the others.

Entry #5

What a fucking waste of my valuable time. Now I have to scrap the whole mothercuntfucking I.M.P. experiments. Red fucking Eye wants to take the research in a "new direction". One failure too many. Like you can make a fucking omelet without a few generations of dead chickens.

I told his imminent god-ness that the guidance factor may be more than just genetic, but what the fuck do I know? I'm just a motherfucking scientist. He's a glorified fucking scout. How can I argue against that?

Now he's got me looking at some him-damned piece-o-shit rock. Like I don't have better things to do. Do I look like a fucking geologist?

Entry #4

The cumulation of two years of experiments, and I can write what we learned on a fucking napkin. You know what that tastes like? It tastes like a cunt that's been shit upon.

There are five stages of Impelled Metamorphosis development in a viable subject. The first three levels are well documented in my research journals, the most significant being incremental changes to the subject's relationship to and tolerance of radiation.

Radiation-induced regeneration, even to the point of regrowing limbs, begins at the first stage and radically improves in the second.

When the subject reaches the third stage of Impelled Metamorphosis development, the subject's body actually becomes stronger and faster in the presence of radiation, similar to the "glowing ghoul" and a precursor to the "super alicorn" phenomenon. The subject's healing becomes so advanced that the natural aging process is all but halted.

The fourth stage involves underlying physiological changes in preparation for the fifth and final stage: complete metamorphosis. For example, the pony's body and mind begin to grow the necessary neurological structures that will allow the pony to utilize the new horn and/or wings that the final stage will bestow, as well as other *substructure changes in support of the less obvious but more radical alterations that accompany becoming a fucking alicorn.*

It is at this stage that everything goes to fuck-all on a speeding enema. The Impelled Metamorphosis Potion was never intended to be administered in stages. The most pleasant of the side effects to stage four can be described as "phantom limb syndrome". The false sensations experienced by the subjects appear to be constant and amazingly painful. Subjects in fourth-stage are inevitably driven to seek out more exposure, or simply driven utterly bloodwing-shit insane. All too often, both.

The real problems comes with the extremely narrow bridge between the third stage and the fourth, and with what I have deemed the "Guidance Factor".

First, it has proven virtually impossible to expose a pony to enough I.M.P to bring them to the third stage without crossing the threshold into the fourth. The few examples of successfully stable third-stage subjects have all been in the wild under unrepeatable circumstances. Which is too fucking bad, since stable stage threes have capabilities that give Doc Slaughter's vaunted "enhancements" a run for their bits.

Second, I have determined that successful metamorphosis requires more than just sufficient exposure. It requires a sort of "guidance" through the process. In the case of the existing alicorns, this guidance is given by the Goddess. Whether this is a product of some intentional nurturing, or an environmental response is unclear. Well, it's unclear to fucking me. Red Eye has this "template" theory and has pretty much stopped listening to any-fucking-thing else.

As a side note, I hate that freak-o-nature bastard upstairs. You know, maybe when a grenade blows your legs off and tears up the whole underside of your torso, that's a sign for you to just fucking die.

Entry #3

Fuck. I lost another assistant. Not to a lab accident this time. No, that little cancerous prick decided to bail on me and pursue his own demented "research" some-fucking-where else. Him and his fucking manticore fixation.

What a tail full of shit. He was a useful assistant. Particularly since he didn't have to sleep. Now I will have to autopsy subjects #128 and #129 myself. And I'll have to refill the fucking lanterns on my own. Yet another waste of my time. I'll be missing the fucking bastard by tomorrow.

Won't miss his stink though.

Speaking of stink, they're finally putting in the new disposal chute. Slaughter's getting his part put in tomorrow. It's going to take them a fucking week to get around to putting in mine. I swear that fucker Red Eye gives preferential treatment to cybernetics.

And then he comes down here clamoring for results. Says he's getting sick of sending me ponies only to have them tossed out with the waste. Like Red Eye should fucking talk. At least my research is doing something fucking useful.

Asswipe.

Entry #2

Finally perfected the Induced Metamorphosis Potion recipe. Would have done it sooner if that psycho Twilight Sparkle hadn't been so fucking O.C.D. with her notes. Now that we've got that manticore shit out of the way, the bucks downstairs can start whipping up whole vats of the juice. Still not sure why the fuck his self-importance Red Eye wants that much of it. He plan to go swimming?

Be funny as hell if he did, actually. I'd love to see the fuckers whole body become a bloated, misshapen blob of metastasized, living cancer. That would be fucking hilarious!

So far, the initial numbers have held. We have a solid 18% benevolent effect manifestation in test subjects. Not ideal, but I'd say it's a fuck-ton better than we really could have expected. And more than enough excuse to increase the scale of our tests.

My assistant has expressed particular interest in one of our failed cross-species tests. Of course, I fully expected all cross-species tests to fail. I.M.P. was crafted specifically for ponies, after all. But the effects on other creatures could continue to yield enlightening results.

The test that my assistant is most interested in, however, is the one that produced the least results. In fact, it produced no results at all. All the other creatures tested had at least some reaction, most of them violent and fatal. But I might as well have been shooting a concentrated fucking placebo into that manticore. Unless looking pissed off was an effect, I.M.P. failed to have any affect on it whatso-fucking-ever.

On that note, I've ordered a more convenient waste disposal system. We've got passages under this place that dump into the gorge. Why don't we use them to flush some of this stink out of here?

Entry #1

New project today. About fucking time. Last one was a pointless disaster. Why does the world want to fucking keep wasting my valuable fucking time?

Got a good feeling about this one though. That pompous prick Red Eye got ahold of some pre-war fancy-mane's recipe for the crap that Taint is made out of, the shit that the Goddess uses to fucking create alicorns.

So far, four out of five test subjects have responded with the most grotesque, body-warping deaths. But that last one-in-five? Very promising, indeed!

The entries were stamped from the personal files of Doctor Glue, head of Meta-Pony Research.

I stepped back from the terminal feeling cold and hard. "Subject #129," I whispered hoarsely. This pony had murdered over a hundred ponies in his experiments for Red Eye. Probably double that, and other creatures too. Tortured them to death. *With Taint.*

I felt a ruddy darkness seep across my vision, a drive to violence mounting in every beat of my heart, the likes of which I hadn't felt since Arbu. My nerves were on fire.

I kicked on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle – barely taking note of the new signal it had discovered, or the fact that it helpfully announced I had found "Stable 101" – and ordered the terminal to open the door. I was really hoping Doctor Glue was behind it. Because I was going to kill him. A lot.

The door opened into a chamber of horrors. A catacomb for the horrifically malformed and mutilated byproducts of Doctor Glue's experiments, lit sporadically by mounted lanterns, many of which were dark and cold.

Ponies with massive tumors enveloping their heads. Ponies whose internal organs had been pushed out through their coats by the cancerous masses evolving inside them. Ponies who had dissolved into bubbling, leathery slugs that looked like a hospital horror's miscarriage, discernable only as ponies by the warped remains of their cutie marks. Worse.

The strains of classical music were being piped down here as well, a twisted counterpoint to the vileness. The music was defiled by being played in here; I didn't think I'd ever be able to enjoy Octavia's artistry again.

Regina Grimfeathers was vomiting in a corner. I wanted to clamp my eyes shut against the horror, but I was afraid I would still see them. So I covered my face with my PipLeg instead, staring at the screen.

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle was picking up a flood of red lights ahead.

"Oh muh soul," Calamity whimpered. He had tossed back his hood and was staring in dismay at a body whose bones had undergone a rapid and twisting growth, bursting through muscles and flesh that had turned black and slimy. "Ah think this used t' be a griffin."

Reggie's head shot up. She approached the body, spitting the last of the vomit from her mouth, her breast heaving heavily. "What?… How?" And with mounting rage that echoed my own, *"Why?"* She swung around to Calamity. "How could any pony do that? What was the point?"

"Ah couldn't say," Calamity began, taken aback. Then his voice grew sharp. "But as muh gal Velvet would say, anypony who would do that ain't a pony."

Voices echoed from within the catacombs ahead, and one of them was recognizable.

"Fan out!" Colonel Autumn Leaf ordered. "The coward ran this way. And if you find him, do not kill him. Just wound him. Excessively. But that bastard is *mine!"*

Eyes wide with recognition, Calamity vanished under the hood of his zebra cloak. I scooted against the wall and Reggie moved amongst the bodies, playing dead, as two Enclave soldiers galloped around a corner and charged past us. Reggie stepped out behind them as they passed, leveling her guns. But then lowered them, letting the two soldiers disappear.

"Stealth mission," she groused. "I bet bits t' bottlecaps I'm gonna regret that later."

"Get the fuck out! Get your hemorrhoidal fucking asses out of my laboratory!"

Doctor Glue bellowed at the four ponies surrounding him, three of whom appeared to be Enclave elite guards. We could see them through the security glass window set into the lab door. Glue was a wizened old stallion with a pale grey coat and a stringy charcoal mane. His cutie mark was a blasphemy.

Beside me, Regina was furiously trying to pick the lock with her talons. I could have opened it easily myself, but I knew the moment I did so, she'd go charging into that room, twin guns blazing. And we wouldn't win that fight without casualties.

Behind me were the catacombs. To my left was a stone archway and stairs leading down to a vault door flanked by mounted terminals. I couldn't picture the room beyond, but the fragmented alicorn memories told me that Red Eye's prisoners were down there. Angrily, the little pony in my head pointed out that we were almost there, and we were getting distracted.

But not without good reason.

"No, no. I think we will keep you company while my mares hunt down your master." The reply came from a pony in magnificent jade carapace armor, exquisitely crafted and embellished with ebony filigree and a scarab motif of leaves in iridescent bronze and copper. I didn't need to see any part of the pony to know who it was. The voice was unmistakable.

Colonel Autumn Leaf sneered casually as he strolled around the Glue's lab of horrors. "Just in case he doubles back."

I was watching two mass-murderers. The scope and heinousness of the evil in that room was breath-stealing. Truth be told, I wanted to charge in there guns blazing too. Or worse. there was enough blood in that room to fashion a guillotine for each of them. My little pony was horrified that such a plan crossed my mind, more so by just how appealing it was.

"Fffwhat?" Doctor Glue exploded, yanking my focus back to the window. "What the *fuck* did you just say?"

"You heard me."

"Red Eye is NOT my master!" he exploded again, shaking with rage. "And he's not coming back!" he added. "So you can take your fucking goon squad, shove them up your sphincter, and prance the fuck out of my lab! I've got important fucking research to do and you're wasting my time!"

"So you say," Autumn Leaf dismissed. He moved past chemistry labs, skirting a wall of cages filled with dead animals, and stopped at a machine I could not identify.

Regina growled and took a swipe at the door. "Fuck this," she muttered, drawing one of Kage's hellhound-claw blades. "Why am I pickin' the lock when I could cut right damn through it?"

I felt Calamity press up against me, the ponified hellhound's energy rifle held in his muzzle. I floated out Little Macintosh, then paused. "Wait, I have an idea."

Regina stopped, her expression still seething but her voice calm and smooth as polished steel. "Okay, Littlepip. Your way."

"Get away from that!" Doctor Glue barked inside the room. "That's a very delicate analyzer."

Autumn Leaf pulled the front panel open just a little too hard. I heard something snap. Doctor Glue roared and threw himself at the Colonel, only to be forcibly blocked and pushed to the floor by the guards.

"Oops."

I floated out the assault carbine and slid in one of the magazines, then pulled off the zebra stealth cloak, passing it to Regina. "Both of you, get back at least two corridors."

"Aw crap, Li'lpip. What are ya thinkin'?"

"I'm thinkin' that if these bullets are enchanted with a bypass, then they'll go right through that door and right through their armor," I told my friend. "One spray, and they all go down."

"An' if they ain't, yer givin' away our position an' bringin' the wrath of heaven down on yer mane."

Yeah. That was the problem. Regina's expression showed she had the same concern.

"I'll draw them away while you two remain hidden," I told him. "I still have the advanced Steathbuck. I'll trigger it once I've led them far enough away, then circle back to you."

I looked back into the window, comparing their positions to the red lights on my E.F.S. compass. I would get a few five-round bursts with this weapon while using S.A.T.S., and I wanted to make sure I took down the armored ponies first.

My breath caught as Autumn Leaf produced a hunk of twisted, blue-ish metal. "This? This is your critical research?" Was that…?

The Colonel's next words confirmed my darkest fears. "You are researching starmetal for Red Eye." It wasn't phrased as a question. I didn't know which filled me with more dread: what Red Eye's interest in starmetal was, what Doctor Glue's experiments might entail, or the fact that Autumn Leaf knew about starmetal and could recognize it on sight.

"Don't touch that!" Doctor Glue demanded, struggling against the guards. "Get the hell away from my fucking experiments!"

Autumn Leaf tossed the chunk of Luna's old armor between his forehooves. "What are you doing with this? Shaving off slivers and feeding it to ponies to see what will happen?" Autumn Leaf no longer sounded bored or pleasant. "Or perhaps you are making cybernetics out of this metal? Is this what Red Eye has inside him?"

Regina moved up beside me, the cloak draped over her shoulders but the hood down so she could look me in the eyes. "No, Littlepip," she whispered, holding out her talons for the assault carbine. "Let me do this. For Kage."

Inside the room, Doctor Glue was spitting. "Are you fucking retarded? Is that how the En-fuck promotes? Based on the number of your brain cells that have been replaced by diarrhea? Who the fuck is going to put bizarre-ass metal with unknown properties from motherfucking space in their fucking bodies? I still can't believe anypony was willing to make *armor* out of it."

Taking a breath, he seethed, "And cybersurgery is one floor up, you fetid asshole. Seriously, how long has it been since you were euthanized?"

I looked at Regina. She looked so much like her brother; I could see him in her. And that brought visions of him crumpling, dead from the weapon of an Enclave soldier.

Killed on a mission that I led. What she was asking was for me to put her in equally grave danger. Yet, did I have the right to say no?

The weight of the assault carbine suddenly felt much heavier, even though it was floating weightless.

"We c'n play rock-paper-scissors for it," Reggie suggested confusingly. I looked at her like she'd just spoken in zebra. "Griffin game," she explained with a sigh. "Rock beats scissors, scissors beats paper, paper beats rock. I'd win. Ponies can only do rock."

I still had no idea what the hell she was talking about.

"Aw hell," Calamity said, tossing back his hood. I saw he'd put together Spitfire's Thunder; it was laying on the ground at his hooves. "This ain't gonna happen this way."

Pushing past us, Calamity marched up to the door and pounded a hoof on the window. *"Hey! Brony! I wanna talk t' ya!"* he shouted. *"Ya got some things t' answer fer!"*

Swinging around to me, he suggested, "Run."

All hell broke loose.

"Calamity? Colonel Autumn Leaf turned towards the window, startled recognition ringing clear in his voice. His recovery was swift, immediately followed by an order to his guards. "Bring me that traitor! Dead or alive!"

The elite guards jumped up to follow orders, spinning towards the door and unleashing a massive volley of magical light. The door heated up brightly, flooding the hall with plasmic light – it was like standing inside the Goddess Celestia's mane! – and promptly began to melt. The stonework around it started hissing and glowing. The air near the door became blisteringly hot and the powerful odor of molten slag and magic overrode the stench of blood, rot and spoiled meat from the catacombs.

Regina snatched the assault rifle out of my levitation field, swinging it towards the melting door and returning fire. The sounds of gunfire and battle saddles filled the room, drowning out the classical cello music. One of the red lights on my E.F.S. compass winked out.

I floated out Little Macintosh, using my compass to aim and waiting for enough of the door to slough away for me to take a shot. The light from the door was almost blinding.

Calamity didn't have to wait. He flew back from the door, kicking Spitfire's Thunder off the ground with a forehoof and catching it in his muzzle. The crack of the shot split the air. Another red light on my compass went out.

The door collapsed, lancing beams of lethal magic filling the corridor. I fired a single shot as I scrambled for cover in the stairwell. Calamity and Regina dove behind the nearest deceased monstrosities crafted by Doctor Glue's "research". Reggie let out a screech as one of the beams struck her right arm, burning away an inch of flesh, leaving a blackened and charred wound. The griffin dropped the assault rifle and collapsed behind a mound of misshapen flesh and barely recognizable limbs, tears streaming from her eyes as she dug healing potions out of her supplies.

But this was magical damage, I realized as I watched her hold a healing potion in her beak, tossing her head back and gulping the magical liquid as her left talons drew out one of her pistols. At best, this would be a bad scar. More likely, she wouldn't ever be able to use her trademark two-pistol style effectively again.

Assuming we all lived through this. "Ever again" might be really short.

I spun back towards the entrance. Two of the three elite guards had dropped. Calamity shifted Spitfire's Thunder, pointing it directly at his older brother.

Doctor Glue, no longer being held, jumped up and galloped past Calamity's brother, snatching the starmetal shard in his teeth as he fled.

The Colonel stood his ground, staring through the door at Calamity. A hatch on the back of his jade magically-powered armor popped open and a small turret emerged, taking aim at Doctor Glue. The weapon built into the turret was bizarre yet familiar, made of gleaming blue metal and a glowing power core.

Colonel Autumn Leaf's star blaster fired at Doctor Glue. Unlike Homage's weapon, the beam of energy was a cruel orange, and Doctor Glue was incinerated in a puff of fire.

The Colonel hadn't even needed to aim. Xenith was right. The weapons *wanted* to kill.

Regina leaned around the pile of bloated bodies she was using for cover, trading shots with the remaining guard. A pulse of blue magic struck her in the back, staggering her but failing to penetrate her Talon armor, as the two Enclave soldiers came charging up from behind us. I spun around, slipping into S.A.T.S.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

One of them went down. The other swiveled to face me, the rainbow barrage from her multi-gem cannon forced me to change cover, one of the shots passing close enough to blister the flesh on the back of my neck. I could smell the scorched hairs of my mane.

I returned fire, forcing her to duck back around the corner she had come from. As I reloaded, the classical music was cut, replaced by the last voice we expected to hear.

"Calamity?" Velvet Remedy asked, sounding distressed. My pegasus friend gasped, dropping Spitfire's Thunder to the floor in shock and worry.

Autumn Leaf turned the alien fire blaster on his own brother.

"Velvet?" Calamity asked, momentarily oblivious to anything else. "What are ya doin' here?"

Only Reggie and the other guard seemed unhindered by the voices on the intercom. The guns Calamity had crafted for her were proving capable of punching through Enclave armor. The Enclave guard was already bleeding from several wounds. He kicked over a chemistry table and took cover behind it, trading shots with the griffin.

"I invited her," said the cool, casual voice of Red Eye. Autumn Leaf spun towards the sound of Red Eye's voice and fired, blasting one of the intercoms. "Don't worry, Calamity. She's in good…" his voice paused as if unsure which word to use, "…things with Doctor Slaughter."

I'm expecting a new patient, and we can't be disturbed.

Red Eye… brought my friend right into harm's way? As what? A distraction? Leverage?

What's that cyber-psycho doing to Velvet? my little pony cried out as I ducked out of cover long enough to keep the Enclave soldier pinned. *And what happened to Xenith?*

What about Pyrelight? *She was guarding them. What did Red Eye do?*

"Now, now, Colonel. You can't kill me that way."

"Where are you!" Autumn Leaf roared. In response, I heard a door slide open somewhere out of sight in the room beyond.

"Come and see," Red Eye offered.

Calamity scooped up Spitfire's Thunder, whipping around and firing a single shot through the helmet of the Enclave soldier as she shifted to fire again. The carapace-armored pegasus dropped with a dull thud.

"Y'all go ahead," he shouted to me. "Ah'm goin' after Velvet!"

Autumn Leaf paused for just a moment, then chose his mission over murdering his brother. He reared and flew away from us.

"He's getting away!" Reggie shouted, firing shots at the retreating pegasus. Sparks flew where her bullets ricocheted off his jade armor.

"Go with Calamity!" I yelled back to her as I turned and galloped down to the vault door at the bottom of the stairwell.

⁂

Metal catwalks over glowing vats of I.M.P.

The room at the nadir of Red Eye's Cathedral was a nearly perfect replica of the Goddess' chamber in Maripony. There was even a catwalk stretching out between the vats, ending in a pedestal with a cup. The room shimmered with rippling light emanating from the glowing liquid filling each of the open-topped vats. This was Red Eye's ascension chamber.

The door at the bottom of the stairwell had opened to a pony-sized platform, like a diving board, providing me with this dizzying view of the room below. After all the tight corridors, the abrupt spaciousness of this room had managed to kick up a lingering wisp of dread. Oh agoraphobia, my old friend.

I was suffering from vertigo mixed with severe déjà vu. If this place hadn't been recently constructed – if the metal wasn't shiny and new, and the floor lacking the detritus-clogged lake I remembered so well – I might have started worrying there could be a balefire bomb beneath us.

The giant cage dangling over one of the vats like a piñata filled with unicorns… that was different too.

It had taken me two minutes to hack the terminal. And that was a minute and a half more than I would have actually needed if I hadn't been in denial. Really, can it ever be a good thing when *your name* is the password on somepony else's terminal?

There had been one last journal entry (**Entry #6**) from Doctor Glue on the terminal. This one was an audio log that I downloaded to my PipLeg. Now, I started it playing as I wrapped myself in a field of levitation and floated myself over to the cage.

> *"Normally, I fucking hate field reports. This sort of shit should be left to underlings. No good reason I should have to go wandering about the Equestrian Shithole to get my work done.*
>
> *"Normally. But this time, I'm really fucking happy I didn't have anypony else to trust this to. What I've found… this is too important to let some half-wit in a lab coat fuck up. Investigations into the origin of Red Eye's mystery rock took fucking forever, but it did eventually lead me to a place called Zebratown, where I recovered a chunk of what I believe to be actual, alien fucking metal. I can't wait to get this thing into my lab."*

I was passing over the vats. There were at least two dozen unicorns littered the inside of the cage, not a single one of them moving.

> *"While I was at it, I got a good look at some of the prevailing theories surrounding*

> *that meteorite. Not the zebra craziness, but conclusions by ponies working under Princess Fucking Luna herself. Opinions seem split between 'the meteorite ain't nothing but a rock' and 'falling stars are vessels for fucking spirits to come to our world from outer-fucking-space'. Because, they reckoned, folks like Discord had to come from somewhere. And, they pointed out, the zebra civilization fell into centuries of bloodshed and strife after a meteor shower.*
>
> *"Which is, of course, fucking stupid. The zebras didn't need evil spirits from beyond the sky for them to plunge their country into chaos and war. I mean, had these ponies even fucking met zebras? I've seen one of them fighting in the Pitt, and she was all I needed to see to know they're fucking barbaric animals. The real mystery is how the hell they built a fucking civilization in the first place.*

As I drew closer to the cage, I could see the slow breathing of the caged ponies. They were not dead, but they were all unconscious. Drugged, I assumed. I couldn't imagine they naturally all went to sleep at the same time. I sent a prayer of thanks to Celestia.

If it was anypony other than me, rescue would be impossible. But I didn't need the ponies to be awake and moving in order to lead them out.

> *"Brought up the old theories to Red Eye in passing and even he laughed. 'If there's a spirit here,' he told me, 'It's the Spirit of Progress!'*
>
> *"Looking at my research, for once I agree with the fucker. And actually sharing an opinion with Red Eye makes me want to gut myself with a rusty scalpel.*
>
> *"Anyway, both sides were totally fucking far from the mark. Based on my own analysis, the meteorite did bring something, all right. But it wasn't some fucking asinine evil-star-demon-thing. More like… an infection. A virus that got into our ecosystem and mutated. That's not quite right, but it's a hell of a lot closer than star-spirits or it's-just-a-fucking-rock.*
>
> *"No wonder they blew up the world. Ponies were stupid as shit back then."*

My insides felt like they were twisting up when I realized he had been talking about Xenith. I was not sorry that Doctor Glue was dead. No, not one iota. Not a single hair in my coat worth of sympathy for that disgusting blight on ponykind.

And Red Eye had employed the monster.

As my hooves touched down on the top of the cage, the door that led out onto the central catwalk slid open. I cringed, making myself as small and unnoticeable as possible, when Red Eye galloped in through the open door.

He was alone. And once inside, his gallop dropped back to a trot. Then a walk. Despite having been running, regardless of the war raging above his Cathedral, Red Eye looked unfazed. Confident. His mane and coat neatly groomed. He wore a heavy scarf and his black 101 cape fluttered listlessly behind him.

The door slid shut. As I watched, he stopped and looked around, then activated a StealthBuck in his PipBuck and vanished.

I at once felt both alarmed and foalish. Red Eye was in the room with me and I didn't know where or what he was doing. And why was I flattening myself against the cage when I had a StealthBuck too? A much better one, at that.

I activated the MG StealthBuck II, removing myself from sight.

And not a moment too soon.

The door whisked open again, and Colonel Autumn Leaf swooped into the room. He beat his wings, ascending to get a pegasus' eye's view of the ascension chamber.

"I know you are in here," he said gruffly. "There was no other way to run."

"By intention, I assure you," Red Eye's voice floated out of a dozen speakers. "And now that we're all here…"

There was a flash of light from the open doorway, and a film of magical energy washed across the walls and over the floor and ceiling. An alicorn shield!

Colonel Autumn Leaf spun about to see the dark-green alicorn sitting statuesque just outside the doorway. Another alicorn, a purple one, had just teleported the two of them in, and was wrapping both of them in a shield of her own. Looking up, I saw an identical two just outside the door I had entered through.

"Well, you clearly have me where you want me," Autumn Leaf admitted, flying down to land on the catwalk. "So why not tell me what this is all about? What is the big plan?"

There was a moment of drawn out silence. I began to search for the lock on the cage. I finally spotted it. It was on the bottom, and picking it would cause the bottom of the cage to swing open and dump the helpless unicorns into the vat of swirling green and purple below.

Of course it was.

Red Eye spoke again, and this time he actually sounded surprised, although hardly displeased. "Did you… Did you just *invite* me to *monologue?"*

No, I thought. He invited you to waste enough time talking that your StealthBuck drains, you become visible, and he can kill you.

"So you are going to become the new Goddess," Autumn Leaf surmised, looking at the vats. "Is that it? Replace the one you killed?"

"That's… not wrong," Red Eye admitted.

"And what does this have to do with the Sustained Pegasi Project?" Autumn Leaf prompted, taking to the air to peer beneath the catwalk, searching for the hiding earth pony.

"Oh, everything!" Red Eye proclaimed, clearly warming up to the conversation. "You see, I've finally found the way inside."

"Oh really?" the jade-armored pegasus perked up. "Do tell? Because, from my understanding, it is impossible. And that makes you a liar."

"Impossible? Hardly!" Red Eye's voice proclaimed from the dozen speakers. "There are several things that can get through an alicorn shield, even one that powerful. Telepathy. Telekinesis. Certain types of dragon magic. And, most importantly, anyone that the shield is enchanted with a bypass for can walk or teleport through. Or, as you know, anyone sufficiently related."

"Right," Autumn Leaf agreed. "Too bad Rainbow Dash had no descendants."

"Ah, but Rainbow Dash wasn't the only one the S.P.P. hub's shield was designed to let through," Red Eye countered, and now he had Colonel Autumn Leaf's full attention. "It was also designed to let the Princesses through!"

Wait. What?

"I have a hard time believing you will be in any condition to go anywhere," Autumn Leaf pointed out, "Judging by the late Goddess." I guessed that behind his visor, he was rolling his eyes.

"True. But I will be able to maintain telepathic control over one of my children, who will take control of the Central Hub as a vessel of my will."

Autumn Leaf began searching for Red Eye again. "If you are thinking that one of those sorry excuses for alicorns can get through the shield, then you are pathetically mistaken. Several have already tried." The alien fire blaster swiveled as he scanned the room.

"Oh I know," Red Eye almost purred. "We sent them. I will admit that Nightseer's failure did send me back to the proverbial drawing board…"

Nightseer? It took just a moment for the name to conjure a face. The crazy alicorn in the Royal Castle, the one who had fallen under the influence of the Black Book and was *wearing Luna's skull* as a necklace! *That* was the alicorn who the Goddess and Red Eye tasked with getting through the S.P.P. shield? And she failed?

That… actually explained a lot, in a very twisted way.

"…But it was from her failure that I discovered just why the Goddess' alicorns couldn't make it through. And what was needed. It was just like you said, they are sorry excuses for alicorns. They are flawed – missing something vital to what an alicorn should be. And thus too far removed from what an alicorn should be, and thus Celestia."

Almost as if he wanted to assuage the feelings of the alicorns maintaining the shield, Red Eye kindly added, "No fault of their own; it's the failing in their templates."

"What are you blathering about?" Autumn Leaf asked. He had made a full circle around the room, checking behind each of the vats, and was now landing back on the central catwalk.

"If you understood the creature your High Councilor tried to make friendly with, you'd understand," Red Eye chided. "The essence of the Goddess was formed out of the souls of four dominant ponies. And these ponies, in turn, provided the metaphysical template for the alicorns to follow."

Red Eye wasn't saying anything I didn't already know, and we weren't apparently going anywhere until his StealthBuck ran out or something else changed the status quo, so I focused my attention on the unicorns.

They seemed healthy. Unharmed. Even surprisingly well-fed. Far more than the slaves in Fillydelphia. It occurred to me that some of these unicorns might have volunteered. If so, they were either fanatical disciples or severely misled.

I also noticed that each one was wearing a mechanical collar with a tiny red light. The collars were locked shut.

"Unfortunately," Red Eye continued, "The templates lacked a certain critical diversity…"

Yeah. They were all females. The Goddess had a plan for that. It involved a really, really bad book.

"…They were all unicorns."

Oh. Never thought of that, but I supposed it was true as well. Twilight Sparkle, Trixie, Gestalt and Mosaic: all unicorns.

Whoah! Pull back the reins!

"To create alicorns that can bypass that shield, the templates require a certain… unity."

Each race of ponykind adds to the whole, the voice of the younger Red Eye whispered in my head. *No one greater or more important than the others. It is a vital gestalt, requiring all* *three.*

Oh no.

"A new deity needs to be created with templates from all three races," Red Eye revealed. "Which meant I needed to find a pegasus and a unicorn who were strong enough in mind and soul to become dominant aspects with me in the new Godhood.

"We're all going to get to know each other very well, you in me."

Oh FUCK no!

Colonel Autumn looked appalled. Then he broke into uncontrolled snickers. "What?" Colonel Autumn Leaf laughed, "You are expecting me to take a swim with you?"

He cantered to the edge of the platform, asking, "Or were you planning to drop me in like what happened to Trixie?" He flapped his wings, hovering above the catwalk, showing off. "Yes," he added, answering the unspoken question. "I did my research."

"As did I," Red Eye told him. "Poor, little Autumn Leaf. A middle child, trapped between the perfect son, the loser and the mistake. So you took the only path left: the over-achiever.

"You have the drive, the ambition, not to mention the charisma and force of will, to become the leader of a massive military force. One of the highest ranking officers in your entire country. And yet… it's all born out of a desire for approval."

Autumn Leaf hovered silently. Then slowly spoke. "You know nothing."

"Not from your father, not anymore. You're now the obedient servant of much more powerful ponies than him. But for all your power, you're still just a dog responding to his master's call, hoping to be petted." Red Eye purred cruelly, "That's what makes you perfect. You're a powerful enough soul to become a template, but you'll never be able to challenge me for true dominance."

The room was utterly silent and still, save for the flapping of Autumn Leaf's wings.

"Sorry, Red Eye," he said finally, his voice feigning jovial dismissal. "But you lose. I am not drinking your cup of delusion." He looked pointedly into the cup on the pedestal. "Find somepony else."

The cup erupted in a crackling blast as Red Eye set off the matrix-disruption grenade he had hidden inside it. Colonel Autumn Leaf's armor went dead, and he dropped onto the platform with a resounding clang, utterly paralyzed.

Red Eye disengaged his StealthBuck, appearing on the catwalk less than two yards away. He walked up and nudged the incapacitated Enclave leader with a hoof.

"I'll admit, you did surprise me," Red Eye offered generously. "I needed the Enclave to send some pegasi within my reach, but your insane level of overreaction caught me entirely off-guard." Red Eye lowered his head to Autumn Leaf's helmet. "I've spent more time scrambling to adjust to your Enclave's *massive overkill* than I care to admit."

"What in the name of whatever you hold holy did you expect," Autumn Leaf growled, trapped within his armor like SteelHooves had been when I first talked to him. "What you are planning is nothing short of annihilating an entire country's crops. Your megalomania threatens the pegasi with massive famine and starvation. You are attempting to become the *greatest mass-murderer in Equestria's history* just so you can claim credit for a sunny day!"

Oh Goddesses. Is that what I was doing too? My own plan was not so far different. Was that the cost? Compared to the cruelty of that, the paltry help I had given the ponies of the wasteland paled to insignificance.

"To resurrect Equestria," Red Eye answered bluntly, "Sacrifices must be made."

The callousness of his words struck me. Yes, I was also planning to take control of the Single Pegasus Project. The Enclave needed to be stopped. And Velvet Remedy was right: you can't stop something until you take away its reason for being that way. Furthermore, the ponies of the wasteland deserved to see Celestia's sun again. To know that warmth and hope that only a sunny day could bring.

But I wasn't the sort of cold, uncompassionate creature I saw in both of the ponies below me. I knew something that neither Red Eye nor Autumn Leaf knew, a game-changing factor that made it possible for my plan to succeed without doing unspeakable harm. I knew about the Gardens of Equestria.

"Although, in the end, the Enclave's actions… that is to say, *your* actions… have served my intentions nicely," Red Eye gloated gently. "You've made yourselves so much the villains that our new Godhood will be celebrated as a savior when I end you."

Colonel Autumn Leaf began to swear. "Maybe I will be the one ending you!"

"Interesting fact," Red Eye said over Autumn Leaf's threatening string of curses, "Four ponies became the templates within the Goddess, but they didn't form the Goddess equally. The Goddess was dominated by one mind, one will. And it wasn't the most powerful of the four. No, that would have been Twilight Sparkle. Instead, it was Trixie. And not just Trixie, but Trixie the Showpony. The most *charismatic* of the four.

"I'll be sharing Godhood with a martyr who wants to save everypony and a gutless tool." He smirked. "I'm feeling pretty confident in my chances."

Red Eye turned his gaze up towards the cage. "You can come out now."

What? my little pony stammered. *I… but… oh, forget it.* Her head slumped in defeat. I disengaged the StealthBuck and stared down at the wasteland's other Stable Dweller.

Red Eye smiled at me.

"Not a chance in hell," I told him bluntly.

"Up to you," he said, surprising me.

"Wait… you're giving me a choice?"

Red Eye walked up to the catwalk railing, placed his hooves on it, and peered into the swirling colors of the vat beneath. "Of course I am."

"Why?" I had to know.

"Because I'm going to have a hard enough time struggling against him," he tilted his head towards the collapsed body of Autumn Leaf. "I don't want to be fighting both of the other templates. And I figure there's a far better chance that you'll spend Godhood actually trying to help the wasteland through your benevolent rule, rather than trying to undermine me out of petty revenge, if you actually choose to be there. And finally…"

Red Eye paused, seeming to consider what he wanted to say. "…because unlike him," he said, whipping a tail towards Autumn Leaf, "It doesn't have to be you."

I blinked. My name had been his password, and now he was saying he didn't really need me? That I really wasn't special after all? I felt as wounded as I felt relieved.

"There are twenty-five unicorns in that cage," he pointed out. "Twenty-five hoof-picked chances for a good unicorn template. One of them is bound to be sufficient. But you…" He snorted bemusedly. "You're a sure thing. Imagine my surprise when fate dropped you right in front of me at the seventh hour. A unicorn who not only had all the qualities that guaranteed a strong template, but who would volunteer to become part of the Godhood, and whose rulership would actually make our New Equestria a better, richer place.

"I've always known that I was taking a gamble. No matter how much I researched, planned and created contingencies, inevitably all my efforts would come down to a roll of the dice. You just allowed me to hedge my bets more than I would have thought possible."

My mind caught on one word in all that. Volunteer? "Why the hell would I ever…"

"Because you don't want to risk what will happen if you don't," he said simply. "You already know what *he's* like. You're not going to run the risk that the Godhood will manifest with him in charge. Or some third pony you don't know who might be just as bad."

"You said he couldn't possibly challenge you," I reminded him plaintively.

"Oh very true," Red Eye told me. "But I'm not the one who will be ruling Equestria. I told you before, I'm too much of a monster for the world we are creating. I have no place in it. That will be your job, remember?" He chuckled. "Besides, I'm going to have my plate full controlling the sun, moon and weather."

My jaw dropped.

"Oh dear," Red Eye laughed. "How else did you think I was planning for you to take over my work? My forces and my followers aren't going to be loyal to a new leader just because I tell them to. But they will be loyal to the new me, and any part of me."

I reeled.

"Really, Littlepip, did you ever take the time to seriously think this through? Or did you just assume I was lying?"

I felt numb, removed, like the world was a distant, far-away place. I was in a cocoon of else-ness, staring out at reality through hazy gauze.

The paralysis broke when Red Eye hefted one hindleg over the railing.

"Stop!" I ordered as I floated out Little Macintosh, taking aim.

"You're kidding." Red Eye looked up at me, shock dissolving into contempt. He stared down the barrel pointed between his eyes. "You're kidding, right?"

"No," I told him sternly. "I'm taking option three. The one where I don't have to worry about what the ponies in the Godhood are like because there isn't a new Godhood at all."

"Take the shot!" Autumn Leaf growled. We both ignored him.

"Really, Littlepip?" Red Eye asked. "Would you doom the ponies of Equestria to the Wasteland? To another two-hundred years of futile struggle, poverty and hardship… all ending in death, usually at the whim of the Wasteland's raiders and monsters? They need us, Littlepip. Where will they be without our leadership? What will become of them without our guidance?"

"They don't need us. They don't need a God to save them. They can save themselves."

"I admire your faith, Littlepip. So… childlike. But now it is time to grow up."

Was it? Was I just being naïve? "No," I said slowly, not sure where my thoughts and words were going. "Maybe… I think… it's time for them to grow up."

I thought of the Twilight Society sitting on a treasure of magic and not using it to help anypony. Of the Steel Rangers preying on other ponies in their selfish drive to hoard the technologies of the past. Of New Appleloosa willing to trade with slavers and not lifting a hoof about the horrors of Old Appleloosa not so far from their door.

"It's time for the ponies of the wasteland to stop being so selfish and short-sighted. To start caring about their fellow ponies. To raise their hooves in aid and communal support. To work together to build something bigger and better, not because they're being forced to, but because they want to, for themselves and for their children…"

I remembered the words of Life Bloom: *This is us helping.*

"…It's time for the ponies to tell the wasteland to buck off!"

I thought of the Applejack's Rangers, and SteelHooves' words in Stable Two: *Today, you must choose with whom your Oath lies. Surrender this ignominious goal and join by my side, reaffirming your Oath to the protection of the citizens of Equestria.*

I remembered Homage's broadcast: *And I've got more reports coming in. Heroes all the way from Shattered Hoof to Hoofington have been holding the line against the nightmares from above.*

"And you know what?" I continued. I couldn't have stopped; it was like an avalanche had started inside of me. "I think they want to. They're ready to. You've shown them that rebuilding is possible. I've…" I've what? I knew what. I'd been an example. I couldn't listen to Homage without her drumming it into my head. But saying it, *accepting* it, was another thing entirely. I knew *I* was nothing special, but my reputation had become something powerful.

"…I've been their Lightbringer." I said finally, coating the concept in Homage's words and hoping it didn't sound conceited. "We've done what we can…"

Well, I wasn't quite done yet. I still had one big play to make. But I was done here. With him.

"…and now it's time for Daddy Red Eye and Mommy Littlepip to get the fuck out of their way."

Goddesses. That's where my thoughts were going? Ick. Most dysfunctional family ever. I mentally divorced myself from Red Eye.

Red Eye chuckled, a good-humored sound, having a laugh at my bizarre little speech. "Dear Littlepip. You can't truly believe that. Not after all you've seen. If ponies were capable of that, they would have done so already. They wouldn't have needed us in the first place."

He stared downwards into the glowing, swirling liquid. "If left to their own devices, without us, they would collapse back into the same routines that have kept them under the hoof of the Equestrian Wasteland for two hundred years. Ponies…" Red Eye snorted. "Ponies never change."

"We've made mistakes," I countered. "Ponies do that. We all make mistakes. We all have flaws and weaknesses. But we are stronger when we are together." I felt the comforting weight of the Ministry Mares in my saddlebag. "And together, we can be better than this." We have to be better than this, my little pony added. "We're ponies."

"Stirring," Red Eye quipped, straddling the railing. "Inspirational, even. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an ascension to bathe in."

I cocked Little Macintosh warningly. "Back away from the edge or I *will* put you down."

"No. No you won't," Red Eye stated flatly. "Two reasons. First…" He reached a hoof up to his scarf and pulled it away, revealing a collar identical to the ones on the unicorns. "…because I'm wearing this."

Little Macintosh lowered ever so slightly as I stared at him in confusion.

"Bomb collars," Red Eye explained. "Zebras used to put them round the necks of prisoners of war and set them free. They'd wait for the prisoner to make it back to other ponies, then BOOM!"

I felt queasy. My eyes lowered to the unicorns in the cage, each with a deathtrap around her or his neck.

"These particular bomb collars are linked. If one is disarmed, or the pony wearing it dies, then BOOM! *All* of them go off." Red Eye leveled a gaze at me. "You kill me, you kill them."

The new signal my E.F.S. had notified me about, I realized, had been the bomb collars' shared frequency. Every time I thought I knew Red Eye…

And if something hadn't gone according to plan? If Autumn Leaf had gotten off a lucky shot and killed him before this point? Boom. Just by wearing that thing, he was toying with the lives of the unicorns beneath me in a whole new, disgusting level.

"You'd have to disarm them all simultaneously," he told me. "You? You might just be good enough with telekinesis to perform separate delicate operations on two dozen devices at the same time. But how skilled are you with explosives?"

He had me. Dammit, he had me!

Hell, I could barely disarm a grenade bouquet.

"And second, because if you were going with that option, you would have shot me already."

I really, really hated Red Eye.

This was really happening. I… I was actually going to do this? The little pony in my head was telling me I couldn't just let Red Eye win. But that sounded more like childish rivalry and stubborn pride. And I wasn't going to sacrifice these unicorns, much less the future of the wasteland, for something so selfish.

Really, in a way, it wasn't that different from what I had intended, was it?

No, it really was.

I was trying to bring hope to the wasteland. To banish a very real darkness. And I was willing to lose everything I had, even Homage, to give that to the ponies of Equestria. I wasn't trying to gain anything. I wasn't putting myself on a pedestal or on a throne. But that's what Red Eye wanted.

"And besides, I do have your friends," he reminded me. "After all, repetition is magic."

"What about my friends?" I asked harshly. "Where's Xenith? What have you done to Velvet Remedy? What…"

"Don't worry," Red Eye assured me, "They're fine. All of them. I sent one of my best purples to invite them here. She gave them an offer they would be hard pressed to refuse. And they'll continue to be fine as long as you don't do something stupid."

"Right. They're all helpless, at the mercy of my choices." My little pony snorted. Red Eye had a terrible habit of underestimating my friends.

I thought of my friends. How would they feel about this? What council would they give? The answer hit me like a bucket of ice water.

SteelHooves would not approve. SteelHooves joined me because I represented a chance to do something better, to be a better pony. He died pursuing that belief. And he would be utterly disgusted that I was even contemplating Red Eye's offer. I owed him better than that.

Once again, I remembered sitting with him, staring out over the bay at Friendship City. The city of ponies, I noted, that Colonel Autumn Leaf had ordered burned off the map. But then, hadn't I annihilated a town myself? How could I allow the pony who razed Arbu to become ruler of Equestria? Look at the mistakes I'd made. The damage I'd done. Monterey Jack. Party-Time Mint-als. I couldn't take the role once held by the Princesses!

Red Eye thought I'd be unable to trust anypony else with that power. I knew I couldn't trust myself with it.

Red Eye was appealing to my virtues, both corrupted and true; he knew me better than I knew myself. He always had.

But what Red Eye did not understand – had never understood – was friendship. Alone we were weak, at the mercy of our failings. But together, as friends, we were strong. We buttressed each other. We shared our strengths, protecting each other from our vulnerabilities. Even when apart. I thought of my friends, and I thought of *their* virtues. Loyalty and kindness, perseverance and humility. Red Eye's offer flew in the face of all of them.

Red Eye jumped.

I concentrated.

A moment later, the red-coated stallion floated up, wrapped in my magic, until he was level with my position on top of the cage. His legs flailed at the air helplessly, struggling to get down. Then Red Eye let out a heavy sigh, head drooping.

"Forgot you might do that," he admitted. He sighed again, giving me a plaintive look. "Why?"

"Because the ponies of the wasteland deserve a better ruler than me," I told him. "And a better God than you."

My E.F.S. compass suddenly came alive with a swarm of red lights.

"There is something else you are forgetting," a voice called up from below us. Autumn Leaf had been silent long enough that I'd forgotten he was conscious. "Scissors beats paper."

The alicorn shield collapsed as Enclave-helmeted hellhounds tore through the alicorns at the entrances, their claws slicing easily through the purple alicorns' protective shields. More gouged their way in through the walls, the ceiling and even the floor. One of the vats began to drain as at least one hellhound had the misfortune of digging up into the room directly beneath it.

Hellhounds beat alicorns.

"NO!" Red Eye shouted, seeing decades of carefully laid plans torn apart.

A heavy, muffled thud vibrated through the ascension chamber. Followed by another as something began to hammer the Cathedral from above. A whole new level of bombardment. The *Overcast,* I realized, had started bombarding the fortress with its heaviest weapons.

One of the hellhounds charged onto the catwalk, pulling out a magical energy rifle, and fired. The purple pulse struck Red Eye, dissolving a plate-sized chunk of his scarred, cutie mark free flank. His pony eye opened wide in shock.

Red Eye began to die.

Fuck!

I couldn't save him. He'd be dead in seconds, and he was going to take all of us with him.

Inspiration hit, born of panic. I pulled the MG StealthBuck II out of my PipLeg and swapped in the Canterlot broadcaster, setting it to broadcast on every frequency I could before turning it on.

My head exploded as death-tainted static poured into the room. My magic imploded, dropping the dying Red Eye into the vat beneath us as a vice clamped down on my horn. My eyes began to bleed. The unicorns beneath me moaned in agony. Inside his suit, Colonel Autumn screamed. Several of the hellhounds howled, collapsing and writhing. More than a few managed to tear off their helmets.

More beams of light slashed through the room. One of them struck into the cage, dissolving one of the tranquilized unicorns, the glowing ash spilling down into the I.M.P. pool below.

The bomb collars didn't go off. Like on the *Lenticular,* the Canterlot static completely flooded the collar's channel, preventing them from sending the trigger signal.

I turned the broadcaster off again, fishing out a healing potion and downing it swiftly. I then focused on the cage's lock as I wrapped the unicorns in a telekinetic sheath. We were too exposed here. I needed to get us out!

More heavy thuds shook the chamber. The Cathedral was being pulverized.

"Take me with you," Colonel Autumn Leaf commanded. "Save me!"

"Go with your hellhounds," I shouted back.

"They haven't been ordered to do that," he admitted, pleading. "My first officer is about to turn this place into a crater." And the hellhounds were acceptable losses. There was no provision in their orders for self-preservation.

The lock clicked. The bottom of the cage swung open, the twenty-four remaining ponies floating in place above the vat of swirling I.M.P. below.

"Look, I'm good with explosives," the Colonel bargained. "I can walk you through disarming those collars. But only if you take me with you!"

I glowered, staring at the pony who had been behind the destruction of the Canterlot Ruins, the murderer of Star Sparkle. The pony who had ordered his own brother, my best friend, to be hunted and killed. Who had sent the Wonderbolts after us. Ordered the attacks on Friendship City, New Appleloosa, and more.

"On one condition," I told Calamity's brother.

"Anything!" he agreed readily.

"Tell me how to rig that star blaster's battery to explode!" I ordered. Doctor Glue had indicated there were tunnels beneath the Cathedral. The hellhounds were already spilling taint into them. How much worse would the Everfree Forest become once this room was torn apart and all of this, a million tons of pure I.M.P. released into the environment? I couldn't even imagine what that would do to Equestria. It would be more devastating than a megaspell.

It wasn't enough to let this room be destroyed. It needed to be vaporized.

* * *

My head was pounding, my brain trying to claw its way out of my skull. There was a warm, wet stickiness dribbling out of my ears and nostrils. My abused horn protested, the effort it took to pick the lock on the last collar seemed more than it took to once float a boxcar.

The collar snapped open, and I shut off the broadcaster one last time, slumping against the wall. We were in what was left of Doctor Glue's laboratory. My gaze lingered over all the unicorns. I had only turned on the broadcaster for a few second for each collar, but the cumulative toll was devastating. I was out of healing potions. And four of the ponies hadn't survived.

The rational part of my brain (or as much of it that wasn't trying to leak out my ears), told me that I had saved twenty lives. Out of twenty-five. And that four out of five wasn't that bad.

The little pony in my head was weeping, mourning every one of the five I had failed.

The powerful thudding overhead caused part of the ceiling above to give, raining down dirt and several blocks of stone, reminding me that I hadn't saved anypony yet. Until we were out of here, all I had done was delay their deaths.

I wiped my PipLeg across my eyes and it came back smeared with red. My gaze shifted to the limp form of Autumn Leaf, trapped in his unique jade Enclave armor. I had refused to reboot it until he had fulfilled his part of the deal. I didn't want to be incinerated by that alien weapon as repayment for my helping hoof.

I crawling over to him, turning my attention to the alien fire blaster. "Okay. One more bomb to deal with, and then I'll set you free."

Removing the alien fire blaster and rigging its power core was far more complex than I had imagined. It spoke volumes to me, realizing how skilled Homage was to have done what she did. I felt a happy pang in my heart, pride in my mare mixing with the hurtful reality that I would almost certainly never see her face again.

There just wasn't enough time. There was never enough time.

The homemade explosive hummed to life, the charges from the bomb collars ringing the bright orange glow of the star blaster's power core. I set the timer and floated it out and down the stairwell, guiding it into the ascension chamber. I knew the room well enough that I didn't have to see it to place the bomb right into Red Eye's cup.

I gave us ten minutes. The hammering above shook the room, but I didn't think the *Overcast* would be able to blast down this deep quite that quickly.

"Okay then," Colonel Autumn Leaf said. "Reboot me, and let's get the hell out of here."

I turned to Calamity's brother. The butcher of the wastelands. Setting him free… it wasn't a question of whether he'd do more damage, but how much. How many more ponies was I letting him murder by letting him go.

A realization swept over me. A determined frown crept across my muzzle. I crouched down to him, telekinetically lifting his visor so I could look into his eyes. Autumn Leaf had fiery hazel eyes. Calamity's eyes, the realization struck me painfully. But they were tinted crimson, streams of blood running from the corners, matting his coat and pooling in his helmet.

"There's something you should know about me," I told him sadly. "I'm not the Bearer of Honesty. But I know her. And I love her."

I floated out Little Macintosh. Autumn Leaf's eyes went wide.

BLAM!

Standing back up, I slid Applejack's gun into its holster and began floating the twenty still-living ponies in the room.

For the longest time, I had thought of myself as Red Eye's reflection (granting one of Pinkie Pie's particularly warped funhouse mirrors). But I was comparing myself to the wrong pony. I wasn't Red Eye.

I was Applesnack.

* * *

All my friends were already waiting at the *Tortoise* when I galloped up, twenty still-unconscious unicorns floating in tow.

"Well, all right!" Calamity whooped. "Let's get this show on the wing!"

The Cathedral was nothing but rubble, only a few of the barracks houses still halfway intact. The *Overcast* was hammering the ground with blasts of multi-hued energy, pulverizing its way through the sublevels. The Thunderhead itself was heavily damaged, pouring smoke from multiple breaches, the rumble of its thunderclouds no longer steady or harmonious. The dragon and alicorns were nowhere to be seen. Any of Red Eyes troops who survived had fled into the Everfree Forest. Which, I imagined, was just waiting to eat them.

Calamity had gathered everyone into the *Tortoise,* friends and *Overcast* escapees alike, and relocated to the shelter created by one of the downed Raptors. From the shredding of its hull, I suspected the dragon had taken it down. Fortunately, I had the *Tortoise's* tag on my PipLeg, so (after a brief spark of panic) I had no trouble finding it.

"Autumn Leaf?" Calamity asked as I arrived, panting, dripping with sweat.

"He didn't make it," I said, choosing not to elaborate. "Neither did Red Eye."

A pained expression settled on Calamity's face. "Fer the best, really," he said, turning towards the sky-tank's cockpit.

My heachache was pounding hard enough to rival the *Overcast's* bombardment, and it spiked to teeth-gnashing intensity with each epic boom. I wanted my friends, a bed, and a pony-sized healing potion.

I opened the back, and was immediately yanked inside and into a hug. "Littlepip, where have you been? I've been so worried!"

Relief flooded me and I hugged her back. "Learning to play rock-paper-scissors," I told her. I thought of the star-born explosive I'd left behind, due to go off any moment now, if it hadn't already. "Bet on rock."

My relief was replaced with mane-raising alarm as I spotted, over her shoulder and through wisps of her mane, the sleeping form of the albino hellhound. Despite how crowded the *Tortoise* was, the other ponies were cringing back, avoiding touching the creature. I hoped he was under Velvet's spell and thoroughly sedated to boot. My eyes drifted down over the body to lock on the shiny, cybernetic leg where, hours ago, nothing had been.

"You let yourself be taken prisoner in order to help the hellhound, didn't you?" I said dully.

"We had everything under control," Life Bloom piped up from where he was tending to Reggie, the scarlet glow from his horn matching the glow around Reggie's crippled arm. "Xenith's back at the hut. There isn't anything more I can do for her, and we didn't dare move her. Fortunately, the alicorn didn't seem to care."

They left her *alone?*

"Pyrelight's back there watching over her," Life Bloom added.

Okay, I thought, remembering my time in Fillydelphia. *Not alone then.* That I could accept.

"Yes, and Calamity was sooo gallant," Velvet cooed. "You should have seen him! Those Enclave hellhounds guarding us never stood a chance."

My head hurt. A lot.

I moved for one of the rucksacks, fishing for a healing potion, as Calamity strapped himself into the harness.

"What in tarnation is that one doin'?" he asked suddenly, craning to look upwards out of his armored window.

I turned around and stuck my head out the open door of the sky-tank, looking upwards at the massive Thunderhead above the pulverized remains of the Cathedral. One badly damaged Raptor had re-melded into the *Overcast's* stormclouds, and a second was moving up, trailing plumes of black smoke behind it as it struggled to keep altitude long enough to dock. The shadow of a third Raptor was visible through the smoke, approaching from the far side.

Approaching awfully fast.

I looked around, counting four downed Raptors. Three apparently from the cyberdragon and one from the artillery cannons the Cathedral used to have. That left two, the *Lenticular* and the Raptor that had gone off chasing it.

I floated in my earbloom, bracing myself, and turned on the Enclave's inter-warship channel, ready to turn it off at the first hiss of static. Instead, I heard the voice of a mare.

"Raptor Lenticular! **This is the** ***Thunderhead Overcast!*** **If you do not respond, we will shoot you out of the sky!"**

There was no response. Several of the *Overcast's* guns swiveled towards the incoming warship.

"Raptor Lenticular! **Cut your engines. This is your last warning."**

The Raptor did not cut its engines. If anything, it looked like it was speeding up.

"Whoa nelly!" Calamity shouted out. "That bird's gonna ram 'er!"

The *Overcast* opened fire. But it was already too late. The blasts of super-intensified magical energy slashed holes into the *Lenticular,* causing the ship to bleed; but it stayed its course, not slowing.

I stared, my eyes growing wider and wider as I realized what I was seeing. The Raptor was bleeding! Pinkish vapor was pouring out of its wounds.

The *Raptor Lenticular* was full of Pink Cloud!

The Overcast had stopped its bombardment and was trying to move, but the massive ship had the speed and agility of a turtle. A new voice – a gravelly stallion's voice – boomed over the military channel with an almost supernatural power. **"FOR**

CANTERLOT!"

The *Raptor Lenticular* struck the *Overcast* with a rapturous explosion. Whoever was aboard had frontloaded the ship with every bomb on board. The explosion blew out both of the *Overcast's* thunderclouds on the struck side and tore a massive hole in the side of the mobile siege platform, the Raptor wedging into the bigger ship like a poisonous dart.

I spotted the silhouette of a pony-like figure flee from the rear of the *Lenticular,* flying away on bat-like wings even as pegasi started to pour out of the mortally wounded Thunderhead, abandoning ship.

Beneath the Tortoise, the ground shifted, collapsing downward. The bomb I had created had gone off, silently vaporizing the earth beneath us. And now the ruins of the Cathedral were collapsing into a massive sinkhole.

Calamity needed no other encouragement. He beat his wings and pulled the Tortoise into the air, fleeing the scene with a tank full of escapees and twenty floating unicorns in tow. I turned and sat, looking out the back door, drinking a health potion.

* * *

We almost made it back to Zecora's Hut.

I heard the crack of the shot. And Calamity's yelp as the bullet from Gutshot's anti-machine rifle pierced the cockpit and struck into the wing-muscles on Calamity's right side, crippling him. The Tortoise dropped, smashing into treetops. My levitation spell imploded as I was thrown against the back door, which flew open, scattering ponies into the forest below.

My body slammed into a thick branch hard enough to snap it, breaking ribs, bruising my abdomen and knocking the wind out of me. I tumbled through the tree, feeling like I was being viciously pummeled by raiders. My right hindleg hit a branch badly and I heard a snap, followed by searing pain. I slammed into the ground on my back, my E.F.S. flashing warnings, and blacked out.

When I came to, Velvet Remedy was standing over me, her horn glowing as she focused on my broken hindleg. Reggie was standing at my side, her bad arm bandaged in a sling, blood pouring down a series of gashes along her head and flanks. She was staring forward, glaring daggers.

My eyes caught one blue suit of carapace armor, then another and another. We were surrounded by Wonderbolts. And they were having a heated argument. There were voices all around me. Two of them were Calamity's.

"What the hell is this?" Calamity's voice asked.

"Ya fell inta the blue plants, didn'tcha Gutshot?" Calamity snapped back wryly. "Ah knew it burned yer feathers t' be second best, but Ah never imagined you'd want t' be me!" His voice was slowly rising. "Have ya met me? *Have ya seen muh life?"*

I turned, following the voices, to see a bleeding and bedraggled Calamity staring down a mirror image of himself in Wonderbolt armor, the anti-machine rifle of his battle saddle pointed between my best friend's eyes.

"Gutshot, stand down," Skydive ordered, stepping up beside Calamity.

"Like hell I will," the Calamity-doppleganger shouted. "We still have a mission."

"Yes," Strafewise countered, approaching to flank the real Calamity on the other side.

"But not this one. We've run the clock."

"Back away!" Gutshot shouted, trembling. They weren't blocking his shot. But he seemed unwilling to take it while they stood against him. "We can't fail this one. I can't fail this one!"

"We will be failing a lot more than orders if you pull that trigger," Jet spoke up, her voice low and rich like dark chocolate. "Things are not the way we thought they were."

"What the hell has gotten into you!? He's the enemy! Deadshot's a traitor!"

"Deadshot?" Calamity said, swaying from blood loss. "Dammit, are ya so fixated on that ya can't see what's right in front of yer face?"

A scream erupted right beside me. Everypony spun around to see Regina Grimfeathers slump over, a gaping hole in her breast, smoke rising from it. The light of life was fading quickly from her eyes.

Exactly like her twin.

"No!" I whimpered, my ears pasting back.

"Who fired that shot?" Skydive barked, but no shot had been fired. I saw the little tendril of blue wrapping around Reggie's right hindleg. And the others, coming for Velvet and me.

It should be Kage here, not me. Regina had said that; what else had she said that I hadn't heard?

"NO!" I shouted, leaping into the air, grabbing all three of us in telekinetic magic. Velvet Remedy reacted just as swiftly, throwing her shield spell over the ground, trapping the squirming vines beneath it.

This was not going to happen again! I was not going to lose Regina like I failed her brother. We had Velvet Remedy with us this time. We had Life Bloom. This was NOT going to happen!

"Life Bloom!" I shouted, but he was already ahead of me, casting a stabilizing spell on the griffin, halting her slide into death.

BLAM!

I spun around at the gunshot.

Calamity had Little Macintosh in his mouth, smoke coming from the barrel. His doppelganger, Gutshot, was trying to shoot back, unwounded. But nothing was happening. Calamity's shot had disabled the Wonderbolt's battle saddle.

With a roar, Gutshot threw himself at Calamity.

BLAM!

Gutshot fell to the ground, clutching his crippled foreleg. The other Wonderbolts moved in to surround him.

Calamity spat out Little Macintosh and looked at them apologetically. "Ah reckon there was no avoidin' that," he said glumly. "Everfree Forest was muh idea. An' Ah ain't never had a plan yet that didn't amount t' shootin' muhself in the hoof."

* * *

We had a long trek back to Zecora's Hut. Velvet Remedy's shield shimmered beneath us as we walked. Between the crash and the Everfree Forest, we'd lost ten more of the ponies I had rescued, most of them unicorns.

Of those who survived, four had wrapped themselves in cloaks of denial and galloped off. Red Eye couldn't be dead, after all. He was going to be a God. He was going to bring Unity. The others were trudging along with us, shell-shocked, not speaking a word.

None of us felt much like talking either. The only sounds were the distant crackling of flames, the plodding of pony hooves on a magical shield, and the mechanical hiss that the albino hellhound's leg made with every step. He was walking with us, at least for now.

The Wonderbolts had helped us find the ponies our crash had scattered across the forest. They weren't ready to act against the Enclave, but they were going to sit the rest of the conflict out, not helping the Enclave either. Skydive promised to "look us up" after the dust settled.

They had also helped find the rucksacks full of medical supplies. About half the supplies had survived the crash, and most of those had been used repairing the wounds inflicted in the crash.

Tracker had taken off with the Wonderbolts when they left.

Red Eye was defeated and gone. Autumn Leaf was defeated and gone. And yet, I didn't feel the least bit victorious. I felt like I had managed to mitigate failure.

I had to do better than this. Ahead of us lay Neighvarro and the Single Pegasus Project. At the same time, the Enclave was mounting a massive assault on Fillydelphia. Calamity assured me that the Colonel's death wasn't going to prevent that. They had their orders, and another pony was already groomed to step into Autumn Leaf's position. The Enclave wasn't like a Canterlot ghoul. It didn't die when you cut off its head.

After an hour, we stopped to take a break. Catch our breath. Life Bloom had been floating Reggie along above him, and now he and Velvet Remedy turned their healing attentions once again to the horribly wounded adolescent griffin. She was stable, thanks entirely to Life Bloom, his spell putting her into a sort of suspended animation. The same magic used by Cottage Cheese's medical pod. And by the control pod in the S.P.P. Central Hub. Non-idle curiosity pushed me to stare, wondering what it would be like; I had to force myself to look away.

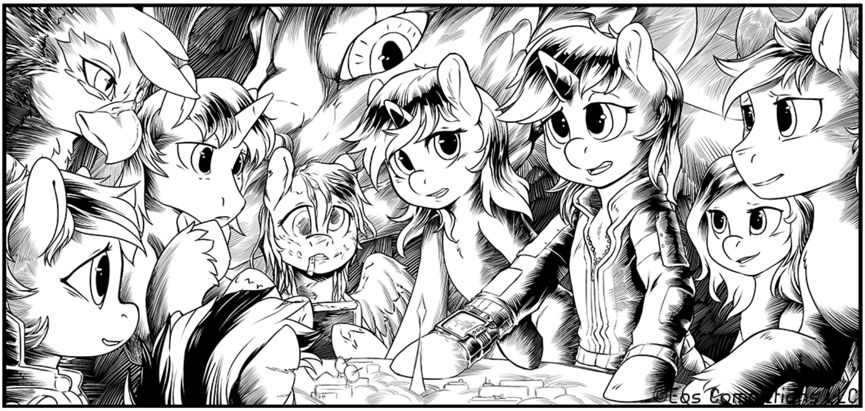
Turning my attention instead to my PipLeg, I realized that I still had an audio recording I hadn't listened to. The old audio log we had found in the Stable-Tec chest in Zecora's Hut. I slipped in my earbloom, turning it on.

> *"Um… hello?"* a sweet, familiar voice sounded in my ear.
>
> *"This feels weird. I know you can't actually hear me, Zecora. But Apple Bloom says that you were always a good person to talk to. And I really needed to talk. I can't bring this stuff to Apple Bloom and Scootaloo, and I don't really talk with my sister anymore, so…I hope you don't mind.*
>
> *"This is Sweetie Belle, by the way. Not that you can hear me. But if you can, and didn't know…*
>
> *"I've been thinking about things. And I know this is going to sound silly, but one of the things I've been thinking about a lot is…*
>
> *"…well…*
>
> *"…rocks."*

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Forty-Four

Galvanize



"The spark didn't work."
"But it did. A different kind of spark… The spark ignited inside me when I realized that you all are my friends!"

Faith.

We are all called, at one time or another, to have faith.

Faith in the Goddesses.

Or faith in ponykind, as Velvet Remedy was struggling to regain.

Or, as with Homage, it is faith in heroes, and the value of the Good Fight.

Sometimes the faith you are called upon to have is faith in yourself.

Faith doesn't require us to be willfully blind or dogmatically stupid. But it does require us to take risks. To put our trust in something we know *might* not be true. Even when the cost of failure could be very high.

Especially then.

For some of us, faith becomes our central reason for living, for pressing on. Faith is what allows us to believe in a happy ending, even in our moments of greatest sorrow. It is what allows us the hope of rescue even in the most suffocating darkness.

And faith, more than anything else, is what the Wasteland is ravenous to devour. More than kindness. More than innocence. The Wasteland does its best to tear away your ability to believe in anything other than itself.

When you no longer believe things can get better, when you stop trying, that's when the Wasteland has won.

The Wasteland can kill us, but so long as we die trying… as long as we die *believing*… then its success against us is a pyrrhic victory at best.

I had been thinking of a story Spike had told us that night in his cave, one of many tales of the Mares before the Ministries. This particular tale was about a time when

Twilight Sparkle's magic had failed her…

Do you know any spells for turning a hydra into a mouse? How 'bout a squirrel?

No! No small rodents of any kind.

…and she had been asked to rely on Pinkie Pie's irrational Pinkie Sense.

You'll be fine. It's your only hope. You have to take a leap of faith.

I am, almost certainly, about to die.

This is my leap of faith.

* * *

Two days ago:

"It's time to end this."

I thumped my forehoof on Zecora's table for emphasis, causing my Sparkle~Cola Rad to bounce. The contents of the bottle fizzled brightly. I still had the soda from… from when? Just after Old Appleloosa, wasn't it? Found it in the wreckage of Ditzy Doo's original delivery wagon. Goddesses, that felt like so long ago. Well, I might as well drink it now. I wasn't expecting a lot of opportunities later.

It was the wee hours of the morning. When we arrived at Zecora's Hut late yesterday evening, Life Bloom and Velvet Remedy had done everything they could for Reggie. Fortunately, her wounds only mimicked those caused by magical energy; and through exhaustive work, they had been able to heal her. But the trauma and the restoration had taken a great deal out of her. Life Bloom had warned us that she needed rest, a lot of it, and wouldn't be in any condition to continue with us for a good while. Right now, she slept on the cot next to Xenith's. The one we'd kept the hellhound on the previous night.

Most of us, myself included, had taken the chance to get some sleep. Even Calamity took a nap after tending to very important hat-recovering. The escapees, those who hadn't left on their own, had bedded down outside – the followers of Red Eye on one side of the hut, everypony else on the other.

Several of the ponies from the *Overcast's* prison had worked together to dig a grave for the foal who had died in captivity. The child's mother fashioned a remembrance marker by pulling a stone from an ash-clogged stream not far away and wrapping it in vines of softly glowing phantasmal flowers.

"Ah've been waitin' fer this," Calamity whispered to Velvet Remedy, who turned her surprised expression from me to him. "While ago, Li'lpip promised me that we'd find a way t' make all this death an' destruction worth somethin'," he explained as she opened her muzzle to ask. "Li'lpip's got a plan."

"Uh can't believe yur planneen tu drink dat," the albino hellhound muttered. I still wasn't entirely sure why he was with us, especially now that he could run (or dig) away. I expected that he was why at least some of the ponies elected to stay outside, not that it would help should he turn hostile. But instead, he seemed almost genial, particularly towards Velvet, whose face he nearly severed not one day ago. "That shiny crud makes uh better 'splosive than uh drink."

Calamity's ears tilted. "It make a better what now?"

"If she don't drink it, Uh'll show you."

Calamity looked about as comfortable with and trusting of the newly friendly hellhound as I was. He turned his focus back to me, although he kept casting sidelong glances in the hellhound's direction.

"Littlepip, what are you planning?" Velvet Remedy asked, sounding both curious and a little put out that this was the first she knew about this. Calamity quickly whispered assurances to the mare he loved, insisting that I'd been keeping everything hush-hush and that even he didn't know.

"The Single Pegasus Project," I told my friends (and the assorted strangers in the hut with us). "We're going to bring back the sun."

Only Calamity looked unsurprised, and there were a fair number of gasps.

"You're going to… *bring back the sun?"* Life Bloom sounded like he couldn't possibly have heard that correctly.

"Yes!" I thumped the table again, the Sparkle~Cola Rad hopping farther away.

"We could see Celestia's sun? Feel her warmth again? Everypony?"

I looked at Velvet Remedy. "Something you said a while ago really stuck with me," I told her. "You said that you can't really stop something bad until you take away its reason for existing." I watched as she sat down and slowly called on that memory of being in Calamity's embrace, breaking down after the horror we stumbled upon at Fluttershy's Cottage.

"The Enclave exists because of the cloud curtain. That's the source of their control, through a stranglehold on crops and information. Without it, the Enclave will cease to exist." I knew that was hardly going to be an immediate effect, and so did they.

"Open the sky and they won't be able to stop all the pegasi who look down and then decide to buck off the government who has lied to them," I proclaimed. "Open the sky and they no longer have a reason to slaughter ponies out of fear that one of us might remove their precious clouds."

"Open the sky," Velvet interrupted cautiously, "And the pegasi will starve. We can't do that."

I paused, then nodded slowly. "I know. And we won't." I smiled as I looked at my friends, a smile that hid the chill in my heart. "That's what makes us different than Red Eye. Well, one of the great many things. Red Eye would have just blasted the cloud curtain away. We need to get in, analyze the situation, and trigger a cloud-sweep from as many of the towers as we can without causing famine."

"Fer how long?" Calamity asked, clearly concerned. "The Enclave's kept population down so that everypony c'n eat comfortably on what they c'n provide, plus food t' stockpile. Ya cut the farmland in half, they'll be able t' make that up from stockpiles fer maybe a year. Then ya got a crisis. They ain't ready t' live on scraps like we do down here. Y'all will have ponies starvin' t' death while others hoard. Pegasi raidin' parties takin' what they can from towns below…"

Calamity shook his head, "Ah tell ya, we do this, it's gonna be a bloody mess."

"Maybe for just a little while," I admitted, but I assured him, "I know a way to fix that. I just can't talk about that part just yet. But I'll tell you tomorrow. We've got to meet with some people first."

Calamity leveled a prolonged stare at me. Then his expression brightened. "That's muh girl!"

Velvet Remedy cleared her throat, and Calamity jumped to rephrase, "Not muh girl, muh girl. Ah mean, not like muh mare. Ah jus' meant…" Then he caught her snicker and shut up, blushing.

Life Bloom was still wrapping his mind around what I'd said. "You're going to… give us back… the *sun!*"

"Not just me." I smiled at the buck. "I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"When Homage started calling you the Lightbringer, did she know?" he asked, the question driving a wedge of pain in my heart. For a moment, I couldn't speak; I could only shake my head.

"Two problems, Li'lpip," Calamity stated, "First, ya can't get in. An' second, ya can't even get in t' get in. Not only is the S.P.P. Central Hub shielded by the grandmother of all alicorn shields – somethin' that nopony has ever been able t' breach – but it's surrounded by the Enclave's Neighvarro military base, an' that's shielded by the Blue Dome."

"The Blue Dome?"

Calamity sighed. "Remember when the Enclave captured us and had us in those blue energy cages?" he asked, prodding my memory. The first thing I remembered was Ditzy Doo's prodding of the field (zap, "ow"), and I had to prevent myself from snickering.

"The Enclave erected a huge protective dome jus' like that over alla Neighvarro." He glanced towards the sleeping form of Reggie. "Keeps out rogue griffins and the like."

"Ya got plans t' get through those?" Calamity queried.

"Stealth mission?" Velvet Remedy asked warily.

"Actually," I admitted, "I was thinking something closer to a direct attack."

Dead, stunned silence. Broken first by the hellhound. "Und you let her make the plans?" He leveled a wry stare at Calamity and Velvet. "Un purpose?"

I tried to head off the coming avalanche of protests. "Look, the moment they know we're there, they will start bringing the full might of that military base to bear," I claimed reasonably. "And we won't last minutes against that."

"Ah, and thus the full-frontal assault makes sense." Life Bloom rolled his eyes. "Makes our deaths quicker."

I shot him a look. "We're not Red Eye. We don't have the force for a sustained battle.

"The way I see it, we have two options. Either we pull off the most flawless stealth mission ever…" I could read in their expressions how likely they all believed that wasn't. "…or we pull a smash-and-grab that gets us to our objective before they know what's hit them."

"Ah surgical strike," Calamity suggested, pondering. "Could work. Assumin' ya c'n find a way past the two shields."

I nodded eagerly, looking to the others. "So, who's in?"

"She asks, without even tellin' us half the plan," Calamity snarked, exchanging amused looks with Velvet Remedy. Smiling back to me, he proclaimed, "We are, of course."

"Uh'm not." The albino cyber-hellhound growled slightly. "Attackeen uh winged pony base en the clouds? That's uh long way tu fall."

I flinched. I stared at the hellhound, and he returned my gaze, his eyes boring into me for a moment. He knew.

"Still, Uh know someone who might be able tu help you," he offered reluctantly. "Eef the winged ponies ain't killed 'er yet," he added. "Und yu cun rescue hellhounds as good as you rescue ponies."

I wasn't sure if he was challenging my skill or my willingness.

"Who?"

"Fluffykins," he said. "She wus a Warclaw, one uf ur fiercest. Used tu run the biggest pack en Old Olneigh… before your Enclave snatched 'er up." The albino shrugged. "Long time ago. Before they came with their magic noises."

"A test subject," Calamity concluded. "For the Enclave's behavior-control experiments."

"Most likely, she's dead. But ef not, you let her loose, und she'll take care uf any pegasi she cun find." As an afterthought, he told Calamity, "Don't be one uf 'em."

"Fluffykins," Reggie chuckled groggily, surprising all of us. I had no idea when the adolescent griffin had slipped out of sleep. "Scourge of the Enclave."

She looked blearily at all of us. "I'm in."

"No," Life Bloom told her. "You're not. You're not going to be in anything but a bed for at least a week." The two of them glared challengingly at each other. I shared a look with Velvet.

Calamity, already focused on the task ahead, inquired, "Okay, Li'lpip. What first?"

"First…" I paused, tapping the tip of my hoof on the table. "First, we have to get the ponies outside to safety. I want to take them to Junction R-7. So, I guess, first we need transportation."

I challenged Calamity, "Think you can get the *Tortoise* back up and flying?"

Calamity snorted. "An' here Ah thought y'all might ask fer somethin' hard." He turned and nodded towards the wing Velvet had bound in a cast. "We don't call 'em sky-tanks fer nothin'. The armor o' that thing damn near stopped a shot from an anti-machine rifle. If it hadn't, I'd have lost more than just the use of a wing." He frowned seriously. "Crash did more damage t' us than the Tortoise, Ah'll bet. But even if we get it fixed, Ah won't be able t' fly it."

I nodded sadly. Then, on impulse, I trotted over and gave Calamity a fierce hug. "We'll figure something out."

There were a few pegasi amongst the captives we had rescued from the Enclave's Thunderhead. Maybe we could ask one of them?

Velvet Remedy got up, walking past me. "Littlepip? Could I have a word with you? In private?"

I gulped. I gave Calamity a worried look, and he just shrugged. He was wearing the exact same expression I always pictured a father would wear while his wife insisted their daughter swallow helpful but icky-tasting medicine.

Velvet Remedy was walking out of the hut. I paused then started trotting after her.

As soon as I stepped hoof out of the doorway, the cyber-legged hellhound moved, swiftly crossing the room and taking up the doorway. I jumped back as he blotted out the light coming from the room inside, kicking up my Eyes-Forward Sparkle.

"Leetlepip," he said with an almost whispering hiss. "Ain't no small thing, you're intendeen. Tu bring back the moon und the blanket uf gems." Blanket of…? Oh, he meant the *stars.*

All this time, I had been so focused on the idea that I was bringing back the sun, I had forgotten that what I was doing would return so much more to Equestria. Or that there might be those for whom the gift of the night sky might hold much greater significance.

Goddess Luna, I thought, must be so very disappointed in me.

"You do this, und even Uh might forgive you… uh leetle."

I stared at him, paralyzed. He *did* know!

As if reading my thoughts (hellhounds, can't do that, right?), the albino cyberhound growled, "The Splendid Valley packs declared themselves at war with ponies. When you're at war, you don't git tu complain when the enemy kills you." He glared at me sternly. "Uh don't blame you fur them. But the Ghost Farm packs? The pegasi put 'em down there tu die, just like Red Eye did with those unicorns…"

His next words hit like a sledgehammer. "Und Uh notice which ones you didn't rescue."

Autumn Leaf had forced peaceful hellhounds into battle and then had his own guns fire on their position. He had intended them to die while helplessly driven against their will. If anything, his unrepentantly callous discarding of their lives had been a final, clear signal that even as he cried out for rescue, he had no regard at all for the lives of others.

But the truth was, I hadn't tried to save them either.

"I… I couldn't," I told the hellhound sadly. "They were violent. I don't have anything like Velvet's spell. And if just one of them slipped out of my telekinesis…" Something, I knew, that would have been all too easy – all one would have to do was get close enough to a wall to shove off of it and they could push themselves out of my levitation field. "… and killed one of the unicorns, their collars would have gone off and we'd all be dead."

The truth was, I couldn't have saved both. And I chose the unicorns over the hellhounds. Unicorns who had been faithful acolytes of Red Eye and his new Unity over once peaceful hellhounds who had been tortured by the Enclave.

Yes, because then they will be free-willed, hyper-aggressive creatures who have just suffered mind-control at the hooves of ponies, Life Bloom had reminded us. *Far less dangerous.*

"I wish I could have," I admitted. "But I couldn't rescue both. And, yes, I chose the ones who wouldn't likely slaughter the rest of the ponies I was rescuing. Or, hopefully, anypony else."

Because if I had rescued them knowing that they would slaughter more ponies, just like if I had let Autumn Leaf go, then wouldn't I be at least partially responsible for everyone they killed afterwards?

Zebra logic was, perhaps, not so insane after all.

Velvet Remedy was waiting for me at the edge of the glade of phantasmal flowers.

With a sigh, I lowered my head, my gaze turned up to the (semi-) friendly hellhound. "Your people have every reason to hate me, but I really am trying to do the right thing, the best I can." That, I could only assume, was the coldest of comforts. But I had to say it. I had to say something. "I'm sorry that I haven't been able to do better."

Another thought occurred to me. "After this, the pegasi will have plenty of reason to hate me too." I felt sudden empathy for Scootaloo. "To save Equestria, I've become the villain of the piece."

I moved slowly away from him, turning my gaze to Velvet Remedy. As I started to move towards her, the albino hellhound hissed again. "You du this, you give us back the moon and the jewels of the night, and maybe we'll have reason tu see you as more than just a villain too."

He coughed hesitantly. Then added, “Und maybe Uh know another who could help you. Tell me where you are gathereen, und maybe Uh’ll send ’im your way.”

I stopped, my body suddenly a battleground. My head loved the idea of another ally, a hellhound no less. And my heart leapt at a chance to do better. But my gut churned uneasily at the idea of giving the location – a rendezvous for the ponies who had the fate of Equestria in their hooves – to a monster whom I didn’t really trust.

The Enclave had enslaved them and sent them in to die. I chose not to help. And all this after Splendid Valley… the long history of that place and the way I had written its final chapter. Why would a hellhound ever help a pony?

I looked at the albino hellhound, my eyes drifting to his shiny new cyberleg, and I knew the answer.

Because of Velvet Remedy.

I wasn’t quite willing to trust him, but I was going to give him a chance. So I told him instead about a hardware store near a passenger wagon stop in Fetlock.

* * *

Today:

The first shot was fired less than an hour after dawn. I don’t think anypony will ever know by who. But that shot lit the fire. Two massive armies charged forward over the badlands outside of Fillydelphia.

The orifices of the Enclave Thunderhead *Glorious Dawn* opened and spewed a black-carapaced plague that swarmed down from the sky. Hundreds of battle-armored unicorns and earth ponies, a great many of them survivors of The Pitt, galloped to meet them, firing assault weapons and high-powered rifles with enchanted bullets.

Griffins soared into the sky from the Fillydelphia Wall, anti-machine rifles firing at each target of opportunity. More than a dozen Raptors swooped in, their energy weapons turning Pinkie Pie Balloons into flying infernos. The first four crossed over the wall when Stern unleashed her biggest surprise.

Though badly wounded, Red Eye’s cyberdragon had survived the fight in Everfree Forest, and for reasons only it could know, it still fought for Equestria. And it was pissed. The first of the Raptors was torn apart in a whirlwind of violence.

The sound of heavy, cruel thunder drummed the earth as the *Glorious Dawn* descended into the fray.

* * *

Two days ago:

“Calamity’s under the impression that you killed his brother,” Velvet told me directly. “I need to know: did you?”

Should I lie? Would that spare my friends pain? No, I’d been down that road before. Lying to my friends, especially Velvet, tended to turn out badly.

“Yes.”

She stared at me quietly.

I was trapped in unpleasant déjà vu; hadn’t I just had this conversation? I interrupted her silence. "And before you try telling me I should have given him a chance: you didn't see him down there. And you didn't see Friendship City." My voice was slowly rising. "He'd had chances. You have to want to change, or at least show a shred of remorse or decency or *something…"*

"Like you wanted to change?" Her soft voice sliced through the growing storm of my rant. I shut up, staring back at the mare who had shot me and in doing so saved me.

Deflating, I said simply, "If I had let Calamity's brother go, he would most likely have sought revenge on all of the wasteland. He had no regard for the lives of others, and Red Eye gave him every excuse he needed to turn his Operation: Cauterize into something more like Quarantine and Incinerate."

What was she suggesting we could have done? Kept him paralyzed while we tried to indoctrinate him with morals? Memory-therapy? My mind dredged up some of the less comfortable implications about the Ministry of Peace.

Then I stopped myself. Velvet Remedy hadn't suggested anything. All she did was ask the question; I was the one who galloped off in a questionable direction, my mind still wrapped up in my talk with the hellhound.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "I'm sorry. What was it that you wanted to say about it?"

Velvet shook her head. "Well, first I wanted to see how you were holding up," she told me. "And now I have a fair idea."

I moaned, lifting a hoof to my face. She was concerned about me. And probably concerned about my friendship with Calamity.

I cantered over to stare at the beauty of the softly glowing phantasmal flowers, their vines covering the ground in what looked like a maze for insects. Well, there was plenty of concern to go around.

Attempting to shift the subject, I countered, "How about you? You let yourself be captured by the enemy to help the hellhound who tried to use you as a hostage." I couldn't hide my disbelief. Or my worry. That was *not* a smart decision. As the Princess of Stupid Decisions, I should know. "What were you thinking?"

"I imagined myself in his position," Velvet Remedy confessed as she walked up next to me. She lowered her head to sniff one of the flowers before she continued. "Surrounded by hellhounds, missing a leg, my only chance of recovery dependent on somepony being willing to risk their life for my sake."

She smiled, "Strangely, it wasn't that hard to imagine."

I blinked. Whoa. Hold those reins. "That wasn't the same!" Not even close.

"No," she admitted openly, "But there were enough similar elements that I had little difficulty imagining what the poor boy was going through." Poor boy? The albino death machine? "And I knew that, while I could never be so selfish as to ask another to risk themselves like that, I would secretly be praying to the Goddesses that somepony would."

The look she gave me reminded me a lot of the look she had given me back in the boxcar nearly two months ago. But this was a more mature, wiser version of that look. "How could I not do for him what I knew I'd be praying somepony would do for me? That *he* would do for me should our situations be reversed?"

I thought about that. As I did, my curiosity snuck up on me and I found myself with my nose in the phantasmal flower patch. The flowers did smell good. An ephemeral floral scent that held a suggestion of mint.

"He wouldn't, you know," I told her.

"Should it matter?"

I took a moment to reflect, thinking of the things I had done, and for whom. Thinking, most recently, of braving the Everfree Forest, the Enclave and Red Eye's Cathedral to save unicorns who were, in many cases, willing followers of Red Eye who didn't stick around to say thank you. Some of whom resented me.

I didn't even notice the lack of thanks, more concerned with their safety as they departed alone into the Everfree Forest. And even now, I didn't miss it. No, they would not have done the same for me. But that didn't matter.

"No."

* * *

Today:

"This is boring," Reggie complained as she turned and plowed into another bank of clouds, driving it back. Below, a maze-like swath of grey appeared, a small glimpse of the ruins of Manehattan. "There's an actual battle going on…"

"Just keep at it," Gawdyna ordered. "These clouds won't clear themselves." It was proving harder than she had expected. The cloud curtain kept trying to seal the gaps, filling in almost as quickly as they tore them apart. "Blackwing, Butcher, watch your flanks. You have a black drift moving in."

To make it worse, many of the clouds were charged. A thunderstorm had been building over Manehattan last night.

Reggie turned again, slicing into a thicker cloud with her right wing, attempting to cut it down into a more manageable bundle. She yelped as the cloud zapped her, making her feathers flare out awkwardly, smoke curling from the edges of her wing. "Dammit!"

The six-pegasi Enclave patrol seemed to come out of nowhere. Brightly colored beams of pink and green lanced through the air, two of them striking Gawdyna in the breast of her armor.

"Mother!" Reggie cried out in alarm, pulling out her twin Calamity guns and returning fire.

"I'm fine!" Gawdyna called back, drawing her tri-barreled, magical-energy shotgun as she dove behind a cloud bank. Three of the black-armored pegasi kept firing. Clouds were good for obfuscation, but made for useless cover. Their concentrated fire quickly vaporized the clouds.

Gawd wasn't there.

The pegasi swung around, alerted by their E.F.S. compasses as Gawd burst up through the clouds behind them. It saved two of them. Gawd unloaded all three barrels into the breast of the third, burning through his armor and into his heart.

A crack of thunder tore the air and a second pegasus was ripped apart, severed limbs spinning off, the clouds misted with red. "Say hello to *Little Gilda!"* Butcher whooped.

The remaining pegasus on Gawd backed up, firing rapid blasts of blue and gold from the multi-gem mini-gun in her armor. Gawd grunted at the effort, forcing her body to move more quickly than it wanted to. Three of the strikes tore along her left leg, igniting her body in pain. She swept the magical shotgun around to fire again.

One of the other pegasi dived in at Reggie. She brought up her guns, but he was too fast, spinning and bucking her in the face as he fired twin beams of pink at Butcher. One of the beams struck the Talon heavy gunner squarely, and Butcher dissolved into pink ash, *Little Gilda* tumbling down through the closing hole in the clouds and disappearing from sight.

"Fak!" Reggie yelled, her head spinning, one of her eyes swelling closed. She spun, trying to recover, attempting to bring her pistols back up to bear. The pegasus looped around to face her just in time for the adolescent griffin to get her aim.

Reggie fired both guns into the visor of the Enclave trooper just as his poisonous scorpion tail sunk through her Talon armor and into her back.

The pegasus Gawd had fired on melted away in a liquid stream of green, dissolving in front of her to reveal her daughter as Reggie dropped down through the clouds.

"REGGIE!" Gawd screamed.

* * *

Two days ago:

We had just started back towards Zecora's Hut when the alicorns appeared. Leading them was a midnight blue alicorn with a flowing, silky mane of very light blues, like frost, that reminded me distinctly of Trixie.

I had dropped into a battle stance, ready to try to dodge lightning bolts, Little Macintosh out of its sheath. Velvet Remedy stepped forward, horn aimed. "What do you want?"

Dammit, we did not need this. I'd have to draw them into the forest, away from the hut and the ponies we had rescued. Couldn't risk having any of them caught in the crossfire. Why the hell did this have to happen today?

"You," the pretty-maned alicorn informed Velvet Remedy.

Oh hells no, I thought fiercely.

"We wish to continue. To make more of us," the alicorn continued. "No more Red Eye. No more Black Book. You will fix this."

"You want to… procreate?" Velvet said slowly. It was beginning to dawn on me that the alicorns were acting non-aggressively. I felt a little stunned. "But… you have no males."

Pointing out the obvious there, Velvet. That's the problem.

"You will fix this," the other alicorns echoed the statement in a rather eerie chorus.

"I'm not sure we *can* help," I said. After all the trouble I'd gone through to eliminate the Black Book and Red Eye's apotheosis project, I didn't want to see an attempt to resurrect either.

"Not you!" the lead alicorn said sharply, the others behind her neighing. "We know you. You are The Destroyer. We do not seek *your* aid."

I wasn't sure if I felt more relieved or offended. Mostly, though, I just felt protective of Velvet, my friend, whom they were clearly targeting.

Velvet Remedy stared at them, slowly cocking her head, her ears swiveling. "Why me?"

"We remember your compassion at Maripony," the oddly-maned blue enlightened her. "You are The One Who Helps."

Hubajahwha?

“We bring you the Memories, so that you may fix this,” the alicorn stated, her horn glowing a frosty blue. I only now noticed that she wore a satchel, old and grotesquely stained. Her horn’s glow was echoed by one surrounding the satchel as she opened it and levitated out a PipBuck and what looked like a bundle of gore-encrusted wires with odd attachments. Including a mechanical eye.

Velvet Remedy gasped, taking an involuntary step back as the alicorn floated them towards her.

“So…” I said slowly, realizing what I was seeing. “Something of Red Eye survived after all.”

Red Eye had been dying when he fell into that vat, yes. But he wasn’t dead yet. And who knew how long the cyberpony’s enhancements would prolong the dying process. And this was Red Eye. Of course he had an escape plan. And I had given plenty of time before the star blaster bomb went off.

Not that it did him much good. Those were Red Eye’s cybernetics. He had been *harvested.*

I felt sick.

“We found his corpse in the Dragon Lair,” one of the other alicorns, a purple, claimed.

I fought to shove back the bile in my throat. As wicked as Red Eye was, this was a desecration he didn’t deserve. Instead, I tried to latch onto the more sterile facts the alicorns were presenting.

That made sense. The journal of Doctor Glue mentioned passages beneath the Cathedral, and the Dragon had to have been living somewhere. That would explain how it appeared so suddenly in the middle of the battle. And why Doctor Glue’s requests to use the tunnels to dump the bodies of his victims had received such slow accommodation.

“He had made it that far,” another alicorn explained, “before dying of his wounds and from the Holy Liquid.”

Velvet was staring at the machines torn out of Red Eye’s head with horror and revulsion. I almost expected her to faint. But when had she ever done that?

Memories, the alicorn had said.

Red Eye was recording everything. All his research. All his actions. Everything. His cybernetics were akin to black opal. The massive storage capacity of the PipBuck could probably store days’ worth of his memories. For the rest, he’d need multiple maneframes. I’d seen nothing like that in the Cathedral, but this was the stallion whose other headquarters was in the Ministry of Morale Hub in Fillydelphia. If any building would have the set-up to store that much spying…

Damn. That explained the sprite-bots too. He was probably using them as relays to transmit his “memories” back to the Fillydelphia Hub. I’d guessed before that he must know the real function of those robots, I had never envisioned them being utilized like *that.*

Velvet Remedy squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head forcibly. “No!”

A small blob of meaty red dripped off one of the wires.

The alicorns whinnied and stomped. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Calamity flying up, battle saddle on. Life Bloom was galloping behind him.

Velvet turned a softer gaze to them. "I mean yes," she told them gently. "I will help you. But not like this."

"There is another way?" the frost-maned alicorn asked, her voice surprised.

"There has to be," Velvet Remedy assured her, reaching up a hoof to touch the alicorn's face. "And together, we will find it."

Calamity landed, his eyes darting between Velvet Remedy and the alicorns. Leaning close to me, he whispered loudly, "So… uh… they ain't gonna attack us?"

I really had no words.

The alicorn heard him (not that doing so was much of a feat) and she shifted her gaze towards him, as did half the others.

"We have learned," she admonished Calamity. "Siding with those who oppose The Destroyer and her friends leads to failure."

I blinked. My own previous thoughts about the alicorns resurfaced in my mind: they never fell for the same trap twice.

* * *

Today:

"Hold the line!" the Steel Ranger shouted, his armor speeding through a reloading cycle as he crouched behind the rubble that until ten minutes ago had still been a mostly-intact Java's Cup. "Those winged bastards get no closer to Stable-Tec than right here!"

The zorching sound and the smell of ozone, melted metal and boiled flesh told him that he had just lost one more of his soldiers. Knights, all of them. Too young and too unprepared to be fighting for their home against enemies like this.

The reload cycle finished just as the squad of black-carapace-wearing ponies flew overhead. The Steel Ranger launched two missiles and watched them home in on a single target, blowing the Enclave invader out of the sky. The rest of the squad broke apart, swooping back to strike at him from all angles.

He couldn't get them all, so he focused on the ones in front and to his left, opening up with his grenade machine gun. He had a clip of magical energy grenades scavenged from one of the patrols of these bitches his squad had taken down before. No better time to use them than the present. So he was rather shocked when one of the Enclave attackers closing in on his right was ripped from the sky with anti-armor grenade fire.

The Enclave ponies banked sharply away, reassessing the new threat. The Steel Ranger turned to see another earth pony in magically-powered armor standing on the ridge of rubble across the street. Armor identical to his, except that it was painted in bands of rich apple red.

Without a word, the Steel Ranger turned away from the Applejack's Ranger, focusing on the enemy. The Applejack's Ranger galloped in, shifting to cover his blind spots.

The two of them fought together, side-by-side, until the ground ripped open beneath them, pouring forth Enclave-helmeted hellhounds.

* * *

Two days ago:

Dawn began to break on the horizon, sending streams of smoke-altered light through the trees. The flowers began to dim, their translucent green petals no longer appearing ephemeral but still no less delicate. The forest awoke silently, all the sounds of nature stilled, the creatures of the forest driven out or burned alive by the fires, their ghosts offering no sounds.

After Velvet Remedy had spoken with them a little while longer, the alicorns departed as swiftly as they had arrived. Or, at least, I thought they did. The lead alicorn's horn glowed a frosty blue and the group of them blurred then vanished from sight.

"Whoa nelly!" Calamity whinnied. "We knew the blue ones could turn invisible, but they ain't never turned other alicorns invisible too."

"They're learning," I said, feeling equally shocked. "Growing."

Velvet's eyes widened at a realization. "They haven't even begun to see their potential."

There was a moment of silence as this new reality sunk in. Then, one by one, we started back towards Zecora's Hut, the earthbound Calamity slowly trotting next to Velvet as she took the lead.

"Littlepip?"

It was Life Bloom. He had fallen behind. And from the sounds of it, he wanted to talk with me. It was turning out to be that sort of day.

"Yes?"

"I've been thinking about how you claimed you had a way to deal with the impending food crisis," he began. "There's a food-production megaspell, isn't there?"

What? How did he…?

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

I hadn't told anypony about this, except for Homage. And I had only breached my promise to Spike with her because she would be one of Element Bearers. I hadn't even dared tell Red Eye.

"Or maybe a poison-cleansing megaspell," he considered. "If you purge all the poison from Sweet Apple Acres, you could feed a lot of ponies. Not nearly enough, but it would be a start."

Twilight Society. Of course. They did have access to much of Twilight Sparkle's spell research, including several of the spells that were woven into the Gardens of Equestria.

"Something like that," I admitted, trying to be intentionally vague enough to not betray Spike and Equestria's most valuable secret. "Yes."

"I'd like to see it," he said next.

"No," I replied swiftly. I quickly explained, "It's not my place to show it. That's up to someone else." Then added, "It's guarded."

"Ah," he said succinctly.

I began walking again, but he stopped me. "You're not planning to just shut down the Single Pegasus Project, are you?" He looked at me seriously, his voice taking a slight edge. "You're not planning on coming back, are you?"

Was it that obvious?

"Part of me wants to hug you and proclaim you my hero for what you are about to do," Life Bloom granted. "But part of me wants to drop you, and keep you paralyzed until I can hoof-deliver you to Homage so she can buck some sense into you."

I almost wished he would. It would be so much easier if this choice were taken from me.

"Somepony has to stay inside that place," I explained to him instead. "The only way the Enclave will stop trying to eliminate everypony who could possibly take over the Central Hub is if it is taken over. And not just for a moment."

Life Bloom nickered. "Well, maybe I'm just thinking with my friendship here, but have you thought about what this will do to Homage?" His voice was cross. "She's already lost Jokeblue. What do you think this will do to her?"

My heart seized painfully.

"This will destroy her!" He stomped the ground for emphasis.

I rounded on him, my face scrunched in internal pain as my feelings of loss shifted into a gut-wrenching abhorrence at myself.

"I know." I felt the first of many tears. I stared into his eyes while my vision blurred hotly. "But what if I don't? If I selfishly put the two of us above all the wasteland and leave Equestria suffering for it?"

I answered for him. "She'll lose her faith in heroes, maybe even in the Good Fight itself. And she'll blame herself for it."

Life Bloom looked stricken.

"I'm not going to betray her cause and the reason she loves me just to keep her." My words were a knife. "That would destroy her too. That would destroy her worse."

I was betraying Homage with my choice, yes. But that would be a far more horrible betrayal. "Homage deserves better." And I was losing someone I had never deserved.

Life Bloom swallowed and turned his gaze away, ashamed.

I frowned somberly. "Besides, I can only get one pony in. Myself. And I'll have to be locked into that machine, put into an artificial coma, in order to run it." I looked up at the smoke-tainted clouds visible through the treetops. "I need to analyze the towers and the pegasus farmlands. Set off only the right towers. I can't do that by just throwing a switch."

Life Bloom considered that for a good while. He was so quiet that I didn't think he would speak again. I had almost started back, noting that the hellhound was once again in the open doorway of Zecora's hut, this time having waylaid Calamity and Velvet Remedy.

"We have to do better, don't we?" he asked in a soft, small voice.

"You are right. And you were right," he continued, finding a little more strength. "We've done almost nothing to help. The Twilight Society. We've sat back, hoarding our secrets, telling ourselves… hell, we're virtually the Enclave in miniature." I swiveled around to see the crimson-and-scarlet maned, white unicorn staring at the dirt, downcast.

"Even my joining you was little more than a token…"

In Zecora's doorway, the cyberhound was dangling my un-drunken Sparkle-Cola RAD in front of Calamity's snout.

"We're hardly deserving of the name we have taken." Life Bloom looked up, his own eyes as tear-filled as my own. "We have to do better. We owe it. You and Homage… you've done so much, so freely. Hell, you're giving up *yourself* for all of us."

He paused, seeming unsure of what to say from there.

I merely nodded, turning my tail on him and trotting off. As much as my heart felt like it had been put through a blender, this was good. I needed Life Bloom thinking this way. I had a plan. And without Homage, it would be up to him alone to convince the Twilight Society to do their part.

⁂

Today:

The ancient ritual chamber within Tenpony Tower was alive with light for the first time in over two hundred years. It had been two centuries since the megaspell known as Celestia One had been activated. The ponies inside had ignored the destruction of the city around them, intent instead on bringing the full power of the sun itself down on those zebra islands and coastal lands that those Equestrian ponies believed held the launch sites for the bulk of the zebra's long-range megaspell missiles. The last time the chamber was used, entire islands had been plunged back into boiling oceans.

The attack had lasted less than half an hour before the pegasi had closed off the sun.

Now, once again, sunlight poured down the artificial chimney, through a well of multi-faceted mirrors that caught and reflected the glow of Celestia's sun, bouncing it down into the bleached-white chamber below, filling the ritual chamber with a monochromatic kaleidoscope of light and shadow.

A line of robed ponies plodded into the chamber. In the lead was an older, mottled brown unicorn. Behind him, a younger, white one with a few curls of scarlet and crimson mane poking out from beneath his hood.

Each moved with purpose, striding to their positions within the intricate, arcane mosaic of polished white tiles. Though not a one of them had ever cast a megaspell before, and in fact most never expected the opportunity to do so would fall within their lifetime, each knew exactly what to do. This was something they had practiced by rote. But this time… they could feel the charge in the air. This time, it was real.

They looked at each other. A few tapped at the mosaic tiles with their hooves or whinnied nervously, still not sure that they were really doing the right thing.

⁂

Two days ago:

I concentrated as best I could. This time, it was my turn to fly Calamity over the treetops of the Everfree Forest. We were going to locate the Tortoise, and I was going to levitate it back with us to Zecora's Hut, the only safe place to really work on it.

"We shoulda jus' brought it back with us the first time," Calamity had commented earlier. I agreed. But yesterday, we had all been so exhausted and depleted by the time the Wonderbolts flew off that none of us were thinking that straight.

Calamity hadn't said anything since. His sharp eyes were watching for shooting plants and other hazards while I tried my best not to drift off to sleep. The effort of flying was momentous. I'd only been up for a hoof-full of hours, but the last few days (hell, the last two *months*) had been so physically and emotionally excruciating that my body didn't care. It wanted rest. And a lot of it.

Not now, I tried to think at it. Not yet.

Calamity nudged for me to widen our search pattern. I looked up at him, enjoying seeing his face, and gave him a small smile. Calamity was a good friend.

The way my morning was going, any minute now either Calamity and I were going to have a painful heart-to-heart, or we would be intercepted by a monster. Probably a chatty one.

I almost groaned when Calamity's muzzle opened. I had so called it.

"Incoming!" he warned, eyes narrowing.

Oh. It's the second option. Yay.

Even so, I was absolutely not ready for what swooped out of the sky in front of us. I found myself staring into the eyes of a *reaper pony!*

It had the body of a dead pegasus – gaunt, coatless, its body a pale and sickly white – but the eyes of a dragon – fierce, glowing-yellow irises with cat-like pupils, full of power and fierce life. From behind its shoulders sprouted large, leathery, bat-like wings. And nightmarish armor growing out of its flesh.

My heart seized. The reaper ponies were real! I mean, really real! Oh Goddesses, I wasn't ready to die! Not now!

"You are Littlepip!" the reaper pony proclaimed, its voice like an earthquake filled with knives. The creature shifted its fearsome stare to Calamity. ***"You are Calamity! Correct?"***

Gah! It knew my name! The reaper ponies knew my name!

(*And it wants to talk,* my little pony rudely interrupted my panic. *SO called it.*)

"Y'all mus' be the demon," Calamity sussed out.

"LIONHEART!" it answered, nearly blasting us back.

Calamity flapped his good wing, backing us away from the reaper pony and its (quite possibly reaping) voice. That's when I noticed the reaper pony had a *PipLeg!* With a broadcaster, just like the ghouls in Stable One.

"Whoa, there," Calamity blurted. "Dial down the volume, will ya? It feels like you're yelling at us." He added, "With a hurricane."

"That is not possible!" the… Canterlot ghoul? Reaper pony?… announced. ***"The armor of the Palace Guards was enchanted by Princess Luna Herself that we may always speak in the Royal Canterlot Voice, so that our words would carry the proper weight!***

Okay. Not a reaper pony. A survivor of the destruction of Canterlot!

"But do not fear! We are here to help!"

"We?" Calamity asked cautiously, raising an eyebrow. "As in royal alicorn pseudo-goddess we?"

"No!" the Canterlot ghoul blasted. ***"We as in we!"***

"Not followin'," Calamity told him, looking around for a second bat-winged Canterlot ghoul. Or, for that matter, a second anything.

In response, a tiny white field mouse with cute little pink eyes scurried up the Canterlot ghoul's hideous neck-armor and perched on his head, squeaking. The little fellow's whisker's wiggled cutely…

…and for some reason I couldn't fathom, the tiny mouse struck an even deeper note of terror in me than the apparent reaper pony had.

Wait! my little pony insisted. *I should know this!*

My little pony slammed together bits of memory like a puzzle.

His name was Lionheart.

I remembered DJ Pon3's broadcast after the Enclave attacked Friendship City. A broadcast focused not on the horror and tragedy, but on the heroic response she was seeing all across Equestria:

I have a tale here of two such heroes taking down one of those warships just south of Stalliongrad. Left a calling card: Lion & Mouse. Well, tell you what, Lion and Mouse. Drop by Tenpony Tower sometime.

The only Raptor taken down in a battle I wasn't there to witness.

I recalled the rising panic of the communications officer on the Enclave inter-warship channel, just before it went deadly: *Are you reporting that the monster which downed the Mammatus…*

And DJ Pon3's last broadcast, which even as I heard it I realized had been recorded hours if not whole days before. (Homage wasn't going to make it easy for the Enclave to catch her, after all.)

I interrupt the Enclave's depressing-ass music for a very special broadcast. Today, I have with me two members of the Wasteland Resistance, none other than the Enclave-fighting duo of Lion & Mouse. And I'll be speaking with them about the good fight, the blows they have struck to the Enclave, and what everypony can do to lend a hoof.

And finally, Watcher: *Homage herself insisted she can't make it. And she told me to tell you that she's sending some more allies your way.*

The allies my marefriend sent me took out the *Overcast!*

Holy hot sex with Celestia!

"…a field mouse?" Calamity blinked. "Ya brought yer pet?"

"DJ Pon3 sent us!" the ghoul announced, confirming what I had deduced. ***"As proof, she told me to give you this."*** Lionheart produced a small, clear plastic bag with a memory orb inside along with a piece of paper which simply read: #8.

The mouse snorted, just a little, blasting the air with yard-long streams of terrifyingly solid *pink.*

"Oh," Calamity muttered. "*That* mouse."

* * *

Today:

Aboard the *Glorious Dawn,* ensign Fancy Lad adjusted his headset once again, listening to reports from the southern detachment of Raptors. The bombing runs were proving effective at clearing out embedded clusters of enemies, but they were losing an uncomfortable amount of bombing wagons to sniper fire.

"Goddesses damn them," he muttered. "They've seeded snipers amongst the slaves." He reached a hoof to a switch beneath one of his terminal monitors. *Raptor Nacreous* was in perfect position, and otherwise only lightly engaged. He flipped the switch. "Senior Comm Officer, this is ensign Fancy Lad reporting. I suggest we send *Raptor Nacreous* to purge the slave compounds on south sector five."

"Copy that," the stallion's voice responded. And those were the last words Fancy Lad ever heard. He spent the next ten seconds spasming as fatal static poured out of his headset, his brain melting out of his ears and nostrils.

Likewise, nearly all thirty other members of the *Glorious Dawn's* communications center collapsed, many of them not even managing to scream. One of them, a mare who had put her headset aside to get a cup of coffee, now galloped for the elevator doors. With each yard, she staggered more painfully, her mind ripping apart from the soft hiss that flowed out of every headset in the room.

The mare collapsed, her eyes swimming in pools of blood, less than a hoof's reach from the elevator, but no longer able to stand and reach the button.

The elevator door slid open anyway, pouring out a thick, blanketing mist of pink, revealing the bat-winged ghoul and his little friend standing just inside.

⁂

Two days ago:

"Throw 'em at killeen joke 'till one uf 'em sticks?"

Velvet Remedy's eyes were shooting stilettos at the albino hellhound.

"Whut?" he asked, at least feigning ignorance. "Killeen joke turned uh male hellhound entu uh female pony."

Velvet blinked. Her eyes widened. I could almost see the spark of innovation ignite behind her black pupils. "oh. Oh!" She pranced in place. "I-dee-ah!" she sang out, then galloped over to the doorway of Zecora's Hut, virtually accosting Calamity and me.

"Oh, we just need to go to Stable Twenty-Nine!" She looked at us pleadingly. "Can we? Please?" Almost timidly, she added, "If that's all right? And it won't interfere with your clandestine plans?"

I nodded, walking through the doorway. "Of course we can." After the gushingly thankful look she gave us, I couldn't quite bring myself to tell her we would have been going there anyway.

"Greetings! You are Velvet Remedy!"

"Ohmygosh!" Velvet Remedy backpeddled as Lionheart's imposing figure filled the doorway.

"Have no fear! We are here to…"

He was cut off by the pained yelp of the albino hellhound. We turned to see the cyberhound crouching in a corner, his paws clamped over his ears.

"Uh, maybe ya outta stay outside," Calamity suggested. I suspected it was less for the hellhound's sake than and more for ours; Velvet Remedy was already giving the whimpering cuisinart a poor-thing look.

I nodded to Lionheart. I wasn't so nearly as concerned about the not-a-reaper-pony as I was about the "pet" he traveled with. She had managed to fill an entire Raptor with concentrated pink cloud in the space of less than two hours. The little beast could probably kill everypony in the hut with an accidental sneeze.

"Speakin' o' clandestine plans," Calamity started, "Why don't ya fill us in jus' a li'l bit 'bout what we're doin'? What's this big meetin' ya got hidden under yer, er… horn?" The rust-coated stallion blushed a little. Apparently, there was a pegasus colloquialism that just didn't apply well to unicorns.

I had two options: answer quickly if only for his sake, or delay by needling him about hiding things under my horn. The latter was so tempting.

"As I said, I've got a plan," I began. "But we can't pull it off alone. The way I figured it, we need the help of seven of the allies we've made these last two months. Two of them are currently at Spike's cave, and one of them, Life Bloom, is with us already." The curly-maned white unicorn who had been laying pensively near Xenith's cot looked up at the mention of his name.

"Back in New Appleloosa, the night after the sonic radboom, I asked Watcher to use the sprite-bots to contact the others and gather them." I didn't bother mentioning that one of those crucial ponies, my beloved Homage, wasn't going to make it. "We're going to be gathering together at the cave in less than a day, and I'll tell you everything else once we're there." Well, almost everything. "But there are some things we need to do first."

"Spike's cave?" Calamity raised an eyebrow high enough to knock back his hat. "Good thing we managed t' get another pair o' wings." He winced as he tried to flap his bound and wounded wing. "Enclave tanks ain't designed fer griffin pilots, an' we'd never make that distance on hoof."

"You will be delivered swiftly!" came the bellowing voice from outside, the open door banging from the blast. ***"While I served at Her Majesty's pleasure, I would often be called upon to pull Her royal chariot!"*** (As if that would excuse using a powerful and dangerous ally, a hero in his own right, as nothing more than a chauffeur.)

"Oh that ain't gonna get old," Reggie snarked, rubbing her knuckles against her ears while the hellhound whined pathetically.

Calamity mulled the new information over a moment. "Alright, Ah'll wait," he told me, clearly getting a little antsy. "We trust you, Li'lpip."

"Good," I said sheepishly. "Because the next step in the plan is to piss off a dragon."

Shocked silence, magnified by the soft clank as somepony dropped something.

Blinking, she-said-what level silence. To which a small squeak was added.

"Ugain, you let 'er make your plans? Un purpose?"

Before anypony could respond, a small voice wavered up from behind us.

"Am I still a zebra?"

Xenith! She… she was awake!

"As best I can tell," Life Bloom said, answering the bandage-enshrouded zebra's question, "Yes."

"Xenith!" came the resounding shout of joy from many muzzles, my own included, as we pounced the poor, barely-recovered zebra mare.

"Uh, should they be doin' that?" the albino cyberhound asked, looking at Life Bloom with a disturbed expression, ears flattened back. He was already half-way out the door, his zebra cloak over his back. Between the new arrivals and Xenith's awakening, the monster had apparently decided it was time to make good on his not-being-with-us stance.

"Oh yes," he responded with a bright smile. "As a medical pony, I can definitely attest to the healing power of group hugs."

* * *

Today:

From the blood-soaked badlands to the embattled ruins, the sounds of battle and the stench of death burned beneath the angry, red-tinted clouds of Fillydelphia, threatening to drown out every last touch of hope or good that the hellish city had left.

Suddenly, a brilliant light of greenish gold burst into the sky, swooping up from the Fillydelphia crater like a rising phoenix, beating back the murderous red glare of the Fillydelphia skies.

But only for a moment. Then that glow of hope winked out, disappearing through the blackened cloud cover. And Fillydelphia was once again plunged into hell.

Too busy fighting for their own lives, almost nopony noticed.

* * *

Two days ago:

"This… is it?"

I watched as Xenith struggled through her own crisis of faith.

The zebra was crouched down, staring hatefully at the strange, bluish rock from Sweetie Belle's storage container. Life Bloom was stammering nearby, once again trying to persuade her that she shouldn't be out of bed.

"This is the great nemesis of my people?" she said with a growl that would have done a hellhound proud. *"This* is what we suffered and killed and died over? It's just a rock!"

Xenith stood up over the chunk of meteorite, her body swaying alarmingly in the wake of the sudden movement.

"Just a stupid… meaningless… *ROCK!"*

Her hoof came up and slammed down on the bluish stone in one focused blow.

I'd seen Xenith's hooves strike bone-breaking blows to hellhounds and kill through Steel Ranger armor; even in my friend's weakened state, the hunk of star-rock didn't stand a chance. The meteorite was pulverized into a fine blue powder under her hoof.

Xenith stood there, breast heaving with panting breaths. Then wobbled and collapsed.

"Celestia have mercy!" Life Bloom ranted as he moved quickly to Xenith's side. "Do you people ever listen to your medics?"

Velvet Remedy answered succinctly. "No."

"You're not in any condition to be exerting yourself," he told Xenith sternly. Looking over his shoulder at Reggie, he re-iterated, "And neither are you."

"Then make us so," Reggie huffed.

"It doesn't work like that," Life Bloom stated. And didn't I wish it did. I was barely able to stand. Only the adrenaline from seeing Xenith wake up was keeping me from hitting the floor and falling asleep and probably not in that order.

I kept telling myself I was going to have a nice, long, comatose sleep in just a few days. My body didn't care and wasn't listening anymore.

"Maybe your spells do not," Xenith intoned slowly, her richly exotic voice almost hypnotizing to me in my weary state. "But there are plenty of herbs and powders here which I could mix for such effects and more."

We looked around. To most of us, Zecora's Hut was full of rubbish. Amongst the shards of pottery and broken glass were numerous bottles, vials and jars of what, to us, was nothing but preserved weeds and desiccated garbage. But Xenith was seeing more. Much more.

"This hut… this was clearly once the home of a great zebra alchemist," Xenith informed us. "The wonders that these receptacles contain…" She trailed off.

"So…" Reggie said hopefully, "We're not going to miss out on the big fight after all?"

Xenith's gaze fell on me. "We will be ready for battle, little one. Just… could you help me stir?" She blushed slightly. "And stand up?"

* * *

Today:

Stern watched from the roof of what had once been Red Eye's office in the Ministry of Morale, as the cyberdragon, surrounded by six of those damned Raptors, finally let out a death wail and fell, twisting in the air as it tumbled back to the earth. Its body crushed the ruined buildings beneath it, a bellowing cloud of dust and rubble washing through the streets.

As pure luck would have it, the dragon's tail struck down against one of the Raptors, pulverizing the dragon killer's starboard propellers. The dragon had taken one last one of those black horrors with it.

"Good for you," Stern grunted.

The roof access door slammed open behind her. The griffin heard hoofs galloping out.

"What?" she asked, her voice filled with measured annoyance at the intrusion. The sleek black griffin turned her white-feathered head towards the source of the bother and stopped when she saw the battered and bleeding zebra in a tattered cloak and haggard saddle pouch. The zebra was panting heavily, her scarred body almost shaking with drive.

Stern stepped back, considering the zebra. "Wait. I know you," she said after just a moment, her eyes lighting with recognition. "You're that fighter from The Pitt. The one Red Eye let go."

Stern was not a stupid griffin. She knew where the few zebra slaves she had captured had come from. And even if she didn't, it was impossible to miss the burning hatred in this one's eyes.

With a flap of her wings, she took to the air, carrying herself out of what she knew to be the zebra's rather impressive jumping range. "Sorry you came all the way home for nothing," she told the zebra flatly. "But I have more critical things to deal with than you and whatever score you want to settle. In case you haven't noticed, we're at war."

The black griffin gave the zebra a dismissive wave of her tail as she turned towards the area of the cities where the Raptors were beginning to separate, two of them already starting to burn away her ground forces and her city with their powerful plasma cannons.

Xenith panted, snorting, as she watched the Talon griffin fly away. Then she craned her neck back, pulling her bloodwing talisman out of the pouch. Xenith tossed the talisman over her head and groaned in momentary pain as she grew wings of her own.

* * *

Two days ago:

The day seemed to pass in a montage; I slipped in and out of sleep several times, mostly in transit aboard the *Tortoise.* Xenith had spent hours working on brews, most of which she had administered to herself or to Reggie (although one had been given to Calamity to help strengthen his healing wing). A couple of those brews, I knew from experience, were not merely of the healing sort. Once Xenith and Reggie were fit to travel, we began to move.

I barely remember Tenpony Tower, and I have only the haziest recollection of delivering the refugees to Junction R-7, save for one stark moment of clarity when I spotted our Overmare there. She was delivering the first of Stable Two's apple orchard to Shattered Hoof.

Something, I thought happily, that was going according to design. I had high hopes for the future of this place.

But my longest period of wakefulness started when Lionheart touched the *Tortoise* down in Fetlock. ***"This is where you wished to be? Are you certain?"*** The Canterlot ghoul's voice echoed painfully inside the sky-tank. ***"I see nothing here but rubble!"***

"That's cuz the real fun's underground," Calamity retorted, rubbing his ears. "And… ow!"

"Sorry!" Lionheart bellowed, not helping in the slightest. Velvet Remedy and I quickly disembarked.

It could have been worse. I had been concerned about taking a ride with "mouse". She may no longer be a gigantic, terrible, teeth-gnashing, sharp scaled, horned, pink-cloud-snoring, could-eat-a-pony-in-one-bite dragon, but she was still one of the most dangerous creatures in the Equestrian Wasteland. Possibly, in a way, even moreso than before now that she was no longer confined to the Royal Treasury, trapped inside a fused horde of gold, gems and valuables. From what I had gleaned from Lionheart, "mouse" had survived the crumble and fall of canterlot by just *being that tough.* As if the transformation hadn't somehow taken all that ancient draconic resilience and compacted it down into this new (and admittedly cute) form.

That was not what the spell was supposed to do. But then, dragons had magic of their own.

When I had put voice to those concerns, the former Royal Guard had responded by producing what I had at first mistook for a giant pink marble. On closer inspection, I had seen that the glass sphere had once been some sort of pet ball, the glass surface having warped so badly from the concentrated pink cloud inside that it became completely sealed.

"How does she get in and out?" I asked.

"How does she breathe?" Velvet wondered, aghast. She quickly checked herself. "Of course, she doesn't have to, does she? She would be the ultimate Canterlot ghoul, I suppose."

The gaunt, reaper-like pegasus had nodded to her, answering me cryptically, ***"Dragon magic."***

I went out on a limb and guessed he didn't know either.

Velvet Remedy and I trotted carefully through the bleak rubble of Fetlock. I had my E.F.S. up, but my compass wasn't showing any hostiles. It wasn't showing any life at all.

A cold wind stirred up flakes of ash and debris. In all directions lay ruins which were once bright, happy homes for pony families. As we neared the waiting station for *Sky Bandit Stages,* my eyes caught black writing on a freestanding wall, centuries-old graffiti:

Everypony is gone.

I was moored in place by the overwhelming desolation of the Equestrian Wasteland.

My reverie was broken by the sound of a ponyhole cover scraping against asphalt as Velvet Remedy shifted it open with a hoof. She glanced at me sheepishly, probably realizing that would have been a better job for her horn, and then vanished into the darkness below.

I moved forward to follow her, but my ears caught a sound. A touch of… conversation?

Cautiously, I moved towards the shelter where I had fought my first manticore. As I neared, lights winked into existence on my compass and the voices became clearer. I breathed a sigh of relief as none of the new lights appeared hostile.

"…even got a fresh supply of Dash straight from the Angels," I heard a stallion saying. "Just tell me what you need. The good doctor's got your fix."

"Uh?" replied a grizzled voice. "You're selleen sticks? Uh don't need sticks. 'Specially sticks frum uh pony."

"No," the stallion repeated, skillfully hiding any hint of exasperation. "Fix. I have your fix. Drugs, my good doggy. Drugs!"

Rounding the corner, my eyes alighted on a pony dressed in what had once been high-society attire (probably from Tenpony Tower) before it had become so… well-traveled. He was accompanied by a brahmin and a griffin, the latter wearing Talon armor with an unfamiliar insignia – neither Gawd's nor Stern's company – carrying a rocket launcher over her back.

The customer that the stallion was attempting to engage in conversation was a heavily-grayed, elderly hellhound holding a brush gun modified with a scope.

The hellhound was crouched down, staring closely at the pony, a look of confusion on his face. "You got rugs? How you gonna stop they winged-ponies with rugs?" the hellhound barked. "Ur they flyin' rugs?"

I cleared my throat. The stallion shifted an eye towards me, unwilling to fully turn his head away from the dangerous monster he was trying to sell to. A look of relief crossed his face.

"Doc Hoof, at your service," he smiled nervously, taking a slight step back from the hellhound. "Don't mind this fellow," he added, not wanting me to provoke or shoot his customer. "He seems… genial enough. But I do believe he's hard of hearing."

Barkin' Saw. Our albino "friend" had indeed sent someone who might be interested in helping us. The hellhound who had seen the Enclave enslave his whole town. The deaf and senile one.

Yay?

Turning to Doc Hoof, I asked, "Do you have any healing potions or bandages? Medical supplies?" I might as well do something useful with the bottle caps I still had to my name.

"Oh yes!" the stallion whinnied proudly. "Ever since that Remedy lass invested, I've been able to procure quite the stock."

Wait, what? Velvet? When? I shook my brain, but the only time I could come up with was while I was behind The Wall in Fillydelphia. My little pony chided that I shouldn't be surprised. It wasn't as if my friends just stood around idly when I wasn't with them.

"Let's just see what the good doctor has in his magic bag, shall we?"

What he had was impressive.

* * *

Today:

Gawd stood on the dark grey cloud and stared into the quickly closing hole over Manehattan, favoring her wounded hindleg. A tear ran down from her good eye and over her beak, hanging on the tip of it before dropping off and disappearing into the same gulf that had swallowed her daughter.

The Enclave patrol had taken out two of their own, including her daughter, before she could finish them. And as a group of six more carapace-armored pegasi approaching from behind her proved, the first patrol had managed to send a warning before they were dispersed.

Gawd checked the load on her magical shotgun, a thin grimace drawing across her beak.

"Don't move," warned the Enclave soldiers as they drew near. **"One wrong swish of your tails, and both of you are ash."**

Gawd traded a sidelong glance with Blackwing. The other griffin gave a slight smile that said all that she needed to say.

The two griffins swung around, aiming their weapons as the sky erupted in deafening thunder.

"Yee-HAW!" Reggie roared as three of the six Enclave soldiers were obliterated by the sheer force of *Little Gilda.*

Gawd blinked in disbelief. Then recovered, just a feather's breadth faster than the remaining Enclave pegasi did. Her shotgun vaporized one of them. Blackwing struck down the second, but not before a beam of light struck out, hitting her left wing, dissolving two-thirds of it.

Gawd swooped to catch the crippled griffin as Reggie annihilated the last pegasus with the supergun.

"Blackwing!" she called out, dashing forward. "Hold on! I've got healing potions."

"Where…" the griffin asked, trying to focus, "…the hell… did you come from?" That poison, he knew, should have killed her. Or, at least, paralyzed her. The fall would have done the rest.

"What?" Reggie teased as she fretfully dug into her bags, ignoring the looks her mother was giving her. "Never seen a zebra-augmented griffin before?"

Gawdyna wasn't sure if she wanted to hug Regina or give her backside a thrashing.

"Now don't you dare pass out on me," Reggie told Blackwing as she poured the healing liquid into the griffin's beak. "We still have some clouds to clear."

* * *

Two days ago:

"I know it's not going to be as simple as turning a rock into a top hat," Velvet was telling Elder Crossroads as I finally joined them in the bowels of Stable Twenty-Nine. "But I'm sure it's possible."

In the time it took to sound out Barkin' Saw and determine that the hellhound actually was a potential ally – a process which started by having to explain to him that I was the pony he was looking for, not Doc Hoof – Velvet Remedy had talked her way into the AJ Ranger's headquarters, gained an audience with their Elder, and pitched her request.

The new leader of the Applejack's Rangers mulled it over. "Any friend of SteelHooves is a lifelong friend of the Rangers," she began. "We'd be honored to lend our hooves… if you were asking any other thing."

Velvet Remedy's face scrunched like she had bitten something sour.

"But you are asking us to help propagate Equestria's alicorn problem," the brown mare with the cropped yellow mane continued. "You do remember that SteelHooves was known as the Mighty Alicorn Hunter, don't you? There was a reason for that. Theses are not…"

"They are not monsters," Velvet Remedy snapped. "They're victims. Of the Goddess. Of Red Eye. And now, when they finally have a chance at freedom and individuality, you're talking like they are a particularly unpleasant infestation that needs to be exterminated."

"We need to do better," I commented as I stepped fully into the room, my words echoing those of Life Bloom. My heart shared his sentiments. He saw how much the efforts of the Twilight Society had fallen short, how paltry they seemed. I was seeing my own in a similar light, particularly where the hellhounds were involved. Seeing Velvet and Crossroads, I sensed we weren't the only two due for this awakening.

Elder Crossroads looked between Velvet Remedy and me, then compromised. "The research you desire access to really belongs to ex-Scribe Rattle," the Elder decided. "Fortunately, he was one of the survivors of the Friendship City Massacre. He is still recovering at Tenpony Tower under the care of Doctor Helpinghoof. If you want access to his experimentation records and studies in transformation magic, you need only obtain *his* permission."

Velvet Remedy found that agreeable. More so, it gave her an excuse to visit the good doctor again. (The real good doctor, not the wandering merchant outside selling Dash to passersby.)

"We have secured Bucklyn Cross as an Applejack's Rangers outpost," Elder Crossroads whinnied. "His research is largely in the maneframe there. If he is willing to help you, have him give you his passwords. We'll see to the rest."

The brown mare looked to me, "And did you want something as well? Or was this a social call?"

I steeled myself. "I need every Applejack's Ranger you can spare."

The Elder lifted an eyebrow. "Battle coming?"

I nodded. "The big one."

* * *

Today:

Xenith hit the gabled rooftop with a bone-cracking thud, skidding down the broken roofing tiles and thumping against the jagged remains of a chimney.

Stern landed on the apex of the roof with her hindlegs, cradling her shattered firing arm, and glaring down at the zebra who had dared challenge her in the air. Xenith had proven every bit the better fighter that she had shown herself to be in The Pitt. But being a better *fighter* isn't worth much in "pegasus-fighting" when you're up against a better *flier.*

And this zebra used her wings like she'd just grown them.

"This was a doomed fight from its inception," Stern growled, deciding how best to finish the damn slave. Her preferred method, her anti-machine rifle, was no longer an option as the pain in her arm attested to. The zebra had seen to that. "Just who do you think you are?"

"I am no one," Xenith said softly, coughing up blood. Stern's eyes widened. Hadn't this one been mute? Maybe she was thinking of the wrong zebra. No, that wasn't possible.

"Then what made you think you could take me?" Stern hissed in disbelief, shifting carefully down the slope of the roof, silhouetted against the broiling red of the Fillydelphia sky.

"Because…" Xenith coughed again, moaning in pain as she tried to move, tried to get back up. "…I am not alone."

"What?" Stern managed, eyes widening, just before the second zebra appeared overhead, the wind blowing back the hood of her cloak as she drove her hooves into the black griffin's back with spine-shattering force.

"Don't. Touch. My. MOTHER!"

* * *

Two days ago:

Sunset spread out across the Equestrian Wasteland like a heavy blanket, the ruddy colors making the cloud curtain glow like a warning light. It looked like the clouds were bleeding.

Elder Cross had given us a full dozen Applejack's Rangers and offered us access to their armory. I personally declined the latter; this wasn't a battle that we could win with bullets. But I made sure that each of the Rangers was fitted for the fight of a lifetime.

"Paladin Strawberry Lemonade?" Calamity asked, sounding impressed.

"Junior Paladin," the mare answered humbly. "But yes. And I'll probably be a full Paladin after this." She didn't even know what "this" was, but that didn't shake the faith in her voice. Her chipper voice became slightly more subdued as she explained, "Promotions tend to come quickly in wartime."

"How is that struggle going?" Velvet Remedy asked demurely.

"Oh, the shooting has died down between us and the Steel Rangers. The Enclave Invasion sent the Steel Rangers back into their holes." Based on what Crossroads had told me earlier, the Applejack's Rangers, meanwhile, had divided their efforts between helping the rest of the wasteland against the Enclave, fortifying, and licking their own wounds. But I hardly expected the proud, young Paladin to put it that way. "Trottingham is ours. As is Manehattan. Fillydelphia is theirs, but it's such a mess right now, why would we want it?

Because there are several hundred ponies there in desperate need of your help? Or how about just because it has the Stable-Tec Headquarters and their maneframe? Or just because it's the right thing to do?

I tactfully didn't mention those out loud. Elder Crossroads had priorities well in hoof. There was no need to rain on the patriotic enthusiasm of the young Paladin. Joy now. Grim realities would come soon enough.

I shifted, gazing out over the Equestrian Wasteland through the narrow window of the Enclave sky-tank, taking it in with my own eyes one last time. In two months, I had seen horrors enough to spawn a lifetime of nightmares, cruelty and despair that could kill the soul. The wasteland was like a corpse – seeming dead and gone, nothing but an empty husk – but crawling with terrible things feeding off its rotting flesh.

Things I had fought. And fought successfully, although all too often at great cost.

"I am Littlepip," I declared softly, the conversation just between the Wasteland and me. "Damaged, but not defeated…" I looked for something else to say, but only one thing came from my heart. "You don't win."

A moment later, we burst above the cloud curtain, and the twilight sky opened above us, twinkling with stars.

* * *

Today:

The little light of hope reappeared in the sky above Fillydelphia once again, punching down through the clouds of black and red like a shooting star. Streams of poisoned light flowed off of the star as it pulsed, each little flash brighter and brighter.

KRA-BRASOOOOOOOOOOM!!!

The little light of hope exploded in a blast brighter than Celestia's sun itself, a ring of sickly colors erupting forth from that center, driving winds before it and tearing the hellish clouds away.

Sunlight, pure and clean, poured into the poisoned city of Fillydelphia from a brilliant blue sky.

The expanding toxic rainbow tore apart the remaining Raptors before striking a fatal blow to the already failing *Glorious Dawn.* The great, black siege platform seemed to collapse under its own weight, tearing itself apart, raining pegasi as it plunged out of the air with a sick rumble.

The tiny speck which was once the glowing light of hope, continued to fall, dropping at breakneck speed towards the Fillydelphia Crater from whence it had come.

The shape of something that resembled a pony, only gaunt and strange with leathery, bat-like wings, arched out of the falling corpse of the *Glorious Dawn* and sped through the air to catch it.

* * *

Two days ago:

"NO!" Spike roared, the force of his shout threatening to blow the Tortoise back off the ledge outside his cave.

The giant purple dragon slammed a fist down on the mountain, standing in the entranceway of his home. "Littlepip! You know *why* I don't allow Steel Rangers in my home! And you brought a *dozen* of them here?"

Piss off a dragon. Check.

"Spike," I said calmly. "These are Applejack's Rangers! They're the good guys." Pointing a hoof, I admonished reasonably, "And you should know that. You've seen the good they've been doing. You've been *Watching.*"

Spike's snout twisted into a begrudging frown. He crossed his arms, snorting smoke. "Well, I still don't see why you had to bring them here."

I sighed deeply. Time to pull out the big, puppy eyes. "Don't you trust me, Spike?"

The dragon groaned. "Ugh. Only for you, Littlepip." Spike lowered his snout and glared at the front-most Ranger. "But behave yourselves. No wandering. Stay in the front room. Got it?"

"Y-yes, your scaliness," the pony managed from inside her magically-powered armor; the slight attempt at remaining tough felt humorous considering Spike could completely enwrap the mare with his tongue.

The lot of us trotted into the gaping maw of the Dragon Cave, Pyrelight and Reggie flying above us, the little pink orb squeaking as it rolled along between our hooves, the shadow of the mouse inside barely visible.

The darkness of the opening gave way to the brightness of the interior. I drew up short, gasping at what I saw. Spike's cave home starkly was not how I remembered it.

Spike's piles of gems had been removed, but not far: they had become a glittering mosaic that covered every wall, depicting images of the Ministry Mares in the joy of their youth. I recognized some of the scenes from stories Spike had told us when we had visited him here several weeks ago. Strings of gems were slung across the ceiling and strung between the multitudes of bookshelves like decorations. The gems were enchanted to glow with soft, colored light. The walls glistened, reflecting those lights like an inverted mirror ball.

"Do you like it?" Silver Bell chimed, galloping up to us. "I made the cave pretty!"

I nodded, stunned. It was beautiful and more than a little overwhelming.

"Oh my," Velvet purred. "Yes, you most certainly did!" She caught the little filly in a hug. I looked around and spotted Ditzy Doo not far way, smiling.

"Regina!"

The cry came from Gawdyna, the older griffin bursting out of a group of ponies and soaring across the room reunite with her daughter.

Spike's cave was *crowded.*

Seven. I'd tried to gather seven allies. There were… a lot more than seven people here! I spotted Blackwing and her team of Talons. I blinked as I recognized the white coat and electric blue mane of Morning Frost standing next to her sunflower-coated friend Sunglint. Was Tracker here too?

No, I learned quickly. But before vanishing into seclusion, he had contacted them. "We heard you were planning something big," Sunglint said with a cheerful seriousness, "And we want to help. We feel just awful about everything the Enclave is doing! This… this just isn't right. Ponies shouldn't act this way!"

"I couldn't agree more," came the familiar voice of the amber-coated Wasteland Crusader.

My jaw dropped. They were here too? "Wha… huh… how?"

"Watcher told us," she said with a stubborn stomp. "You didn't think you were going to leave us out of this, did you?"

Well, yes, actually…

This was… I didn't have words. Hell, I didn't even know several of these ponies.

"You invited my daughter?" Xenith whispered into my ear, having spotted several zebras clustered in the crux of two towering bookshelves. It took me a moment, but I recognized Xephyr. And the zebra next to her, who had painted herself to be nearly black with thin white stripes, was Gloom.

Xenith looked slightly mortified.

I shot Spike a look. He just smiled and shrugged, deftly shifting blame. "This was more Homage's idea than mine."

Oh that so figured.

I waded through the room, feeling dazed. Every few feet, I was stopped by somepony (or zebra, or griffin) who wanted to greet me. All around me, conversations were bubbling.

Gawd thudded down in front of me, blocking my view of everything. Tears were flowing down her cheek from her good eye, and I could see her fighting to keep her composure. "Tell me it was worth it!" she demanded, her voice low and dangerous.

I froze. Oh Goddesses. She'd just learned about Kage.

"It was worth it, mom!" Reggie interrupted, flying up next to me before my brain could put words in my mouth. Gawd glared at her daughter, but Regina stood firm.

"Kage…" Gawdyna bit back a shout, tears flowing. "He was a fighter, a Talon. But he was *my son!"*

"He died like a Talon," I offered, my words feeling lame as they slipped off my tongue. "Brave and steadfast to the very end."

Gawd's stormy demeanor did not improve. Reggie flew in front of me, nearly beak-to-beak with the larger and more grizzled version of herself. "Kage died strikin' a fatal blow t' the Enclave," Regina told her mother. "Not an instant kill, no. But fatal. A slow death, like the thrust of a poisoned knife."

Gawd did seem to appreciate that. But Reggie wasn't done. "How many griffins died, mom, when the Enclave invaded the skies of our homeland? How many more do you think will die before they're done if we don't stop them?" Reggie brushed back her headfeathers. "This was our fight long b'fore it was theirs."

The conversations around us had gone silent. Everypony (and dragon, griffin, zebra and phoenix) was watching. Reggie glanced back at me, giving me a small smile before rounding on her mother again. "An' so far, it seems Calamity and his friends have done most of the fighting for us. Was it worth it that Kage, your son, *my brother,* actually got in a blow? *Fuck yes!"*

Gawdyna Grimfeathers wiped her eye and gazed at her daughter. The rest of the room seemed to be holding its breath. Then I heard a whooping whistle, and the amber mare started stomping applause. Soon, the whole room was thundering.

"Well… okay then," Gawdyna said softly. "You didn't need t' yell. I am yer mother." Reggie looked sheepish and then enwrapped her mother in an embrace.

"Huh? Whut's goin' on?" Barkin' Saw asked nearby. "Whut ded she say?"

* * *

Today:

We emerged from the cloud curtain right beneath Neighvarro. And flew directly into the path of two of the Raptors.

Spike tore past one of them, breathing green fire across its propeller array as he passed. Half the propellers exploded in flame, the others dissolved outright. The burning Raptor canted, out of control, and began to dip into the cloud curtain.

"Victorious!* This is *Raptor Noctilucent!" a voice cried alarm over the Enclave military channel and into my ear. **"We're under attack! It's… it's a *dragon!"***

Spike swooped up through the second layer of clouds, drawing out of sight of the Raptors and their parent Thunderhead. He drew up, hovering just outside the wall of blue light that protected Neighvarro, his giant wings flapping slowly. Inside, pegasi were galloping out of barracks and buildings, staring up at the humungous purple and green creature who had positioned himself between them and the morning sun, casting his shadow across the eastern part of the base.

The Raptor Noctilucent tore up through the clouds, its weapons swiveling towards Spike, bright light building up inside the barrel.

Spike attacked the shield. The blue wall of energy buckled, warped and collapsed under the unstoppable force of Twilight's number one assistant.

* * *

Yesterday:

Breakfast at Spike's Cave. Spike didn't have any tables for ponies, so we were all gathered on the floor, eating breakfast thoughtfully procured by Lionheart late in the night. I wasn't sure where he acquired the rather large bundle of food – which included fresh hay, vegetables and flowers – but I had my suspicions, and I wasn't about to ask.

The majority of Spike's guests had traveled a long and often dangerous way to get to the top of the mountain, and most of us had been suffering various levels of exhaustion the night before. So shortly after the scene between the Grimfeathers, and with promises of long, important discussions and plans the following morning, most everyone had slowly found themselves a place to drift off to sleep.

Now, much better rested, and with the company of friends and heroes, those around me were taking to the morning meal with a lively energy. Calamity was in particularly good spirits. After Velvet's and Life Bloom's attentions and a good night's rest, his wing had finally regained enough strength to allow him to fly. Not well, and not fast, but he was hovering everywhere like a pro.

"This world is way too filled with morning people," Gloom mumbled, her mane drooping over her face, but not far enough to conceal her scowl.

“What are you bringing to the fight?” the amber mare asked Gloom with a level of enthusiasm that clearly did not sit well with the odd zebra.

“Before you get too ahead of yourself, her khaki-coated friend cautioned, “We don’t even know if there will be a fight.”

The amber mare rolled her eyes. “Of course there’s going to be a fight. It’s not like they’re planning to just give the Enclave a good talking to!” Shifting back to Gloom, “So are you a sniper? Medical pon…er, zebra? Fight with your hooves like Xenith? (Isn’t she awesome?)”

“If we are fighting, then I will fight,” Gloom answered gravely. “With blade and poison, and with my life until they kill me. Then probably rise up as a vengeful spirit and haunt whoever’s left.”

The amber mare raised an eyebrow, scooting slightly away. “Allllrighty, then.”

“If this is a battle,” Gawdyna said, sitting just a little ways from me, “then my Talons ’ave much t’ lend t’ the fight.” Knowing Gawd, the word *lend* was meant literally. “We’ve been collecting a significant amount o’ resources an’ tools over these last few weeks.”

“Yeah, that orb vault had turned out to be the ultimate treasure map,” Butcher (who was now Blackwing’s second-in-command) revealed, ignoring a displeased look from Gawd. “Last week, we were able to break into an old zebra vault and get at its armory. Check out some of the exotic new weapons we found sealed up in that place!” Butcher showed off some of the Talon’s new equipment proudly.

“This nasty little melee number is something the zebra’s called a ‘chainsaw’,” Butcher announced. “Never gonna be a replacement for *Little Gilda,* of course! But… damn!”

After rolling her eyes, Blackwing also chose to ignore Gawd’s displeasure, showing off the new addition to her own arsenal.

Xenith identified the strange weapon immediately. “A crossbow,” she intoned. “An assassin’s weapon. Silent and deadly.”

“Like a fart?” Reggie snarked. Then suddenly her eyes lit up. She turned towards her mother.

Gawdyna pinched the bridge of her beak with her talons, her eye scrounged shut. “No.”

“No what?” Reggie protested. “I haven’t…”

“No,” Gawd re-iterated. “I ain’t lettin’ you have a crossbow so you can name it *The Fart.*”

Reggie whined, “But *mom!*”

I felt myself blush as I was suddenly reminded that the gun slinging griffin hero was indeed just an adolescent. I refocused on eating my flowers. Good flowers. Yes. Pretty and tasty.

“…just found an underground research facility where ponies were attempting to apply zebra alchemical techniques to coal,” Blackwing was telling Calamity. “It seems they were hoping to create everlasting coal. They never succeeded, but the did manage to produce an alchemically-treated coal that burns twice as fast. And about ten times as hot.”

“Word o’ warning,” Gawdyna said, leaning over to me. “If you ever think o’ havin’ kids, beware. No matter how much you love them, eventually, they will become teenagers.”

Next to me, Calamity snorted. I merely stammered, thrown a bit. “uh… no.

Children… not really in the plans." I mean, even if there was time, and even if Homage was here, it wasn't like either of use was going to get the other pregnant! In fact, I was pretty sure pregnancy was right out with any pony I had ever fancied. Or griffin… oh, and aren't these flowers delicious. Yes, stare at my plate. Munch, munch, munch. Yay for breakfast!

"Oh wow," Gloom sing-songed. "Littlepip likes mares. You can tell."

I nearly choked. "What? Why do you say that? I wasn't doing anything." My eyes shifted back and forth as I thought quickly. I was not checking out Gawdyna. Or her daughter. Or anymare. I'd made certain of it!

"You were eating flowers," the strange zebra pointed out.

"So?" Xephyr butted in. "Gloom, I eat flowers. *You* eat flowers."

"But it was the lesbian way she was *eating* the flowers."

What?!

"That," Xephyr informed her, "makes no sense." Turning to me, Xenith's daughter advised, "Don't listen to her, Littlepip. Gloom is… strange."

I nodded, unable to find my voice, a flower petal clinging to my lower lip.

Xenith's exotic voice whispered behind me, "If you look at my daughter, I will paralyze you."

Gah!

I wouldn't! Never. But… it didn't help that sometimes I sneaked a glance at Xenith herself. I found myself blushing almost painfully as Homage's tease about a threesome replayed in my forebrain. I spun around, but Xenith wasn't there anymore.

So instead I sunk low and tried to focus on anything but mares (of any species)… or flowers.

Other conversations were continuing all around me. In a far corner, I saw Ditzy Doo engaged in a deep-looking discussion with Barkin' Saw.

"You want tu know now?" Barkin' Saw asked. "Whut kind uf buk es this?"

The ghoul pegasus scrubbed off her chalkboard and scribbled something in response.

My ears caught a plaintive draconic rumble on the other side of the chamber. "Mommy?"

Pyrelight had flown up to Spike's eye level, the pink-filled mouse-ball clutched in her talons. The huge purple and green dragon was staring at the rodent inside with a wrenching mix of emotions.

"You're not mommy," he complained. "You can't be." He reached out and gingerly touched the pet-ball with a claw tip.

Pyrelight nodded sagely. The mouse simply squeaked.

"What sorta big plans?" Calamity was asking Gawd. I had missed a shift in the conversation. But I didn't care. I clung to the new discussion like a life preserver.

"With Shattered Hoof under my wing, and the community you seem so intent on buildin' around it, I've been thinking that maybe it's time t' hang up my holster," Gawdyna admitted. "Mercenary work is a young griffin's game." She looked over at her daughter and the empty space next to her that Kage would have naturally filled. "I've accomplished more while runnin' the Talons than I ever did in the field. I'd have t' be blinded in both eyes not to see I have the opportunity t' build something lastin' here." She added, "And to turn a handsome profit in the process."

My ears perked up, my blush quickly receding. This had become interesting. I felt a spark of hope borne of Gawdyna's words.

"It doesn't take a tactical genius to realize that the Enclave is building up for a huge battle in Fillydelphia sometime very soon," Gawdyna pointed out, "And I'd be willing to gamble by the timing that this little pow-wow isn't unrelated. So here's the deal: I'm offering the full support of my Talons and our resources, but in return I want total freedom to take over Red Eye's resources in Fillydelphia."

"Say what now?" Calamity asked as I fought to pick my jaw up off the floor.

"Cooperation would be appreciated," Gawdyna said. "But in the very least, you and your allies don't get in my way. An' that includes the Applejack's Rangers."

"What… exactly are you planning?" I asked.

"Expand on what y'all 'ave been pushin' me t' do," Gawd claimed. "The area 'round Shattered Hoof an' Junction R-7 is becomin' a civilization. We're gainin' a population, an orchard, a water talisman… everything we need t' become one of the biggest thrivin' communities in the wasteland."

Well, yes. I had kinda been thinking along those lines, I had to admit.

"So, why stop there?" Gawd asked. "By takin' over Red Eye's factories, we could seriously have a shot at rebuildin'. A real New Equestria, not that poisoned Unity crap, with Shattered Hoof as its new Canterlot."

I blinked. Well, Gawd's plan was definitely ambitious. Still, "I'd love to see you take over Red Eye's operations, but only so long as you don't run them the way Red Eye did, through barbarism and slavery…"

Gawd waved a wing. "Settle yer mind, Littlepip. Ain't lookin' t' become the new Red Eye. Wasteland's seen enough o' that kind o' thinkin'."

I felt myself let go of a tension I hadn't realized was building in me.

"A new Equestria?" I pondered the idea. "A new Canterlot? But… who would be the new Princess?"

"You?" Calamity asked. "In Gawd we trust?"

Gawdyna Grimfeathers shook her head. "Monarchies are a pony thing. I'm lookin' fer something more inclusive, more open t' other people." She looked to her daughter, warming to the topic. "A republic perhaps, fashioned in the image of the legendary Griffin Clan Council."

"No Princess?" I said again, still trying to wrap my brain around the idea. "Not even an Overmare?"

"Nope," Reggie said. "Just an Arbiter, for when the heads of the Clans can't agree. Mother would be perfect for that."

We don't play politics and we don't take sides.

A crooked grin spread across Gawd's beak. "To be honest, I've already sent representatives to the buffalo, and I was hoping Xenith might serve as an intermediary with the Angels."

"Me?" Xenith peeped, seeming once again to appear from nowhere. She seemed about to protest, but stopped, looking confused. "Angels?"

I'd heard that name before. Just recently, in fact.

"That would be us," Xephyr called out, apparently having been listening in. Either that, or the name caught her attention. "After we started making Dash like you taught us, the others decided we needed a new tribe name. We couldn't use dad's anymore."

Xenith's eyes widened.

"They wanted to name us something fierce, a name that would demand respect," Xephyr claimed, "So I thought, since we're living beneath a giant Doombunny, why not name ourselves after him?"

"You… named the new tribe… after Doombunny…?" Xenith looked pale. (Which was quite a feat for a zebra.)

"Ah didn't even know the buffalo still existed," Calamity whispered to me.

Velvet Remedy chimed in. "Not everything Red Eye was trying to do was bad," she claimed. "I too would like to take charge of part of Red Eye's work." Gawd scowled, opening her beak to protest, but closed it when Velvet Remedy said, "…his plans for schools and medical centers."

"Y'all are dividin' up somethin' that ain't ours," Calamity warned the two of them.

"I was mostly interested in the factories," Gawd admitted, "But I have the Talons and the ex-raiders of Shattered Hoof to help. No offense, but how is one pony going to build schools and bring education and medicine to all the wasteland?"

"I…" Velvet Remedy blushed uncertainly. "I think I have alicorns."

Gawd blinked.

Xenith scooted closer to Velvet. "If you do this, then would you please start in Glyphmark? Glyphmark needs a school. And a medical center." She looked over at Xephyr. "It has a doctor. And…"

Xenith looked back at Velvet Remedy, her face hardened with determination, "I have decided. I wish to become their teacher. This is something I can do for them."

Velvet's eyes widened, as did her smile. She moved to hug Xenith, but the zebra had anticipated this and swiftly tapped the ground; I heard something break and the zebra vanished in a puff of unhuggable smoke. Velvet plopped back down, looking shocked for a good ten seconds before recovering.

"You're right, Gawdyna," she finally said. "Even if I do have alicorns, I will still need help. So I'll make you a deal." The griffin raised an eyebrow in response, all ears.

Velvet offered. "You help me do this, and in honor of Kage, I will use the name he came up with. And I'll name the Fillydelphia school after him."

"Uh…" Calamity tried to caution, then seemed to give up. Leaning towards me, he muttered, "Ah really hope yer plan involves defeatin' both the Enclave's an' Red Eye's armies in Fillydelphia." He looked at Gawd and Velvet Remedy uneasily.

"The… name Kage came up with?" Gawd asked, confused. She looked at her daughter questioningly.

"The Followers of the Apocalypse."

* * *

Today:

Walking on clouds was… weird.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to truly get over my discomfort. I just had to accept the general wrongness of it and press on.

"Ya sure about splittin' up like this?" Calamity yelled over the driving wind and the sound of the defense array. Above us, Spike was wheeling and dancing, trying to keep away from the blasts of the defense cannons by placing the attacking Raptors between himself and the base.

"Don't worry about me," Velvet Remedy called back, smiling. "This old unicorn's still got a few new tricks."

"Old unicorn?" Calamity called back. "Where? Hidin' behind Velvet?"

A cacophony of rending metal and explosions marked the second Raptor to be taken out by friendly fire. Fortunately, the Enclave soldiers left to operate the defense array were proving too novice to skillfully avoid their own ships and still hit Spike.

Unfortunately, a few of their shots were indeed hitting Spike. And his cover was dwindling.

"We need to go," I called back to the two of them before charging off.

"Y'all better be okay when Ah find ya again," Calamity told Velvet sternly.

The beautiful unicorn smiled and shook her head. "Of course I will."

"They'll come fer ya," Calamity said, not for the first time.

"Let them," Velvet replied. "They'll underestimate me. Everyone underestimates me."

Calamity and Velvet Remedy paused, looking into each others' eyes, embraced in a passionate kiss.

A minute later, they broke apart. Velvet galloped off in a second direction, and Calamity in a third.

* * *

Yesterday:

"Sorry I'm late," the most wonderful voice in Equestria apologized. "Did I miss the briefing?"

Homage's voice brightened the room, lifting my spirits. It was as if my heart was being held aloft by a flock of butterflies.

"Nope," Calamity said to the sprite-bot that the voice of my love was coming from. "We were jus' about t' start. Glad ya could make it."

"Oh thank you!" I gushed at Spike. My eyes began to tear in joy. I was going to have one last time with Homage. Maybe not physically, but this was still more than I had hoped.

He stroked his spines back, looking a little embarrassed by the volume of emotion I was pouring out. "You're welcome." Everyone else in the cave was staring. "It was nothing, really."

"Oh, but it isn't nothing," I insisted. "It's *everything!*"

I couldn't help it. I threw myself around one of his ankles. "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

"If you start kissing Spike," Homage said, her voice sparkling with amusement, "I'm leaving the room."

I stopped, my eyes turning to the crowd, a blush rising.

"Uh, Li'lpip? Y'all were sayin' 'bout how the Enclave depends on the cloud curtain?" Calamity reminded me tactfully. "Y'know. The plan?"

"Oh, oh yes. That."

I pulled myself back up, brushed my mane out of my face and stared back at all the eyes turned towards me. This was it. This was The Plan.

Still, the little pony in my head wouldn't stop bouncing around like Pinkie Pie, cheering Spike and crying out Homage's name.

"The Enclave will annihilate every living soul in Fillydelphia and bury the industrial progress made there under melted rubble if they aren't stopped," I reminded them. "If Red Eye's forces win, the surviving pegasi will end up enslaved or with their heads on pikes."

"And Stern's Talons aren't likely to stop with just one successful victory," Gawd added. "With Red Eye gone, she'll be looking to take over his whole operation. Defeating the Enclave's biggest force? She'll take the war back to the clouds once she smells weakness."

"This is the griffin who wiped out father's tribe, isn't it?" Xephyr asked. Xenith scowled, nodding affirmatively. "Well, then they can't win," the younger zebra insisted.

"Do we have any idea when the Enclave are going to attack?" one of the Applejack's Rangers asked.

"Yes," I told him. "Tomorrow morning." The news was greeted by several voices of dismay.

"It will be the largest, fiercest battle Equestria has endured since the great war," I reiterated. "And, unfortunately, I'm going to miss it."

"WHAT?!" The sound was a chorus.

"We have a chance to end things," I told them. "Not just one battle, but the entire threat of the Enclave entirely. Forever. Tomorrow morning, I'm going to lead a group into the Enclave's military base in Neighvarro, break into the Single Pegasus Project, and tear down the cloud curtain."

"Wait," Morning Frost said, tossing up a hoof. "You're going to take on Neighvarro? I was stationed there, you know. It's biggest military base we've… they've got! Do you know how many troops are stationed there? How about the Thunderhead and the Raptors? The shield? The defense array?"

"The Enclave brought the war down to us," Lionheart announced, sending Silver Bell as deep as she could get beneath Ditzy Doo's wing. **"We are bringing it back up to them."**

"Most of the troops won't be at Neighvarro," I claimed. "We have two advantages going in. First is the element of surprise. The Enclave isn't expecting forces from below to actually attack them on their home… turf?" Had to be a pegasi-appropriate word for that. I pushed forward. "This will be an unexpected tactic."

"Y'all c'n say that again," Calamity neighed.

"Second is the fact that tomorrow morning Neighvarro will be functioning on a skeleton crew," I revealed. "Every available pegasi from Neighvarro has been used to bolster the military force poised to hit Fillydelphia. Until that battle is over, there will be almost nopony left at the base."

I looked to Gawd. "This is the information Kage gave his life for. The one opportunity, the one window of weakness that we can exploit to take the over the S.P.P. and kill the Enclave for good."

Gawdyna Grimfeathers drank that in without comment.

"Once inside the S.P.P. shield, it might take hours to figure the place out. We can't count on what I'm going to do in there happening in time to save the people of Fillydelphia.

"So I need your help, most of you, in the battle for Fillydelphia," I told them. "I have a plan. But… look, what I am about to ask of all of you is more than anypony has the right to ever ask of anyone. But for the sake of everyone else in this room, and everyone out there, both below and above the clouds, I'm asking… no, I'm begging you to help."

"We wouldn't be here if we hadn't already said yes, kid," one of the Applejack's Rangers announced. "Get on with it."

There were whinnies of support all around the cave.

I took a deep breath. And, with that, I laid it out. Starting with the part I felt worst about.

"Ditzy Doo," I said solemnly, focusing on the ghoul pegasus. She was listening from the back, one wing wrapped around her adopted daughter. "I hate this more than anything, but I need to put you right in the heart of the battle."

My heart seized as Silver Bell's eyes went wide. "Mommy?" she asked timidly.

Forcing myself forward, I told her, "I need you to perform another sonic radboom. This time, right in the middle of the conflict." I quickly added, "But I want you to do so with as little risk as possible. If you can take out some of the Enclave's ships, that's wonderful. But the goal is to clear the clouds over the battle zone. So if you can pull it off at a higher altitude, keep yourself out of the firefight, that would be best."

Silver Bell was looking at her mother with a painful expression. "But… who will catch you?"

"Lionheart will," I managed. Looking towards the royal Canterlot ghoul, "I'm sending you and mouse into Fillydelphia. Your mission is to wreak as much havoc amongst the Enclave as possible, keeping their focus off Ditzy Doo. And to catch her if she needs it. Once the sonic radboom happens, I want all three of you out of the area as swiftly as possible."

I had to admit, I was feeling a lot better about sending Ditzy Doo to Fillydelphia than I had in the days before now that we had "Lion and Mouse".

"But for now, I need you to get Ditzy Doo to the Fillydelphia Crater." To Ditzy, "Wait there until it's time. Nopony should bother you in there, and you should be glowing again in no time." I hated this. But there was no other way. Looking at the loveable ghoul pegasus, I whispered to myself. "We can't lose you."

I realized I was banking an awful lot on Ditzy Doo being able to explode twice.

Ditzy Doo gave a cute little salute, then turned to Silver Bell, writing something on her chalkboard. The little filly nodded, embracing her new mother in a teary farewell. I sent all my prayers to Celestia and Luna that they would only be apart for a day.

Velvet Remedy wrapped her tail around Silver Bell as Lionheart trotted up to her. The little pink ball wheeled across the room in their wake as the two ghouls walked out of the cave.

"Hold on," I called out to them. They two ghouls stopped, looking over their shoulders. The little ball smacked into Ditzy Doo's left hindleg and rebounded with a squeak. "Before you go, I will need to speak to Ditzy Doo in private." I need them to wait just a little longer. "Don't worry. It won't be long."

Ditzy Doo nodded patiently and sat down. Silver Bell pushed herself free of Velvet's tail and scurried over to be with her wall-eyed mother.

I swallowed hard and steeled myself for the rest. One of the worst parts was over.

"Gawd, I need you and your Talons to clear the sky over Tenpony Tower and keep it that way."

Reggie protested. "We're not going to be in the battle?" Hopefully not, I thought in response.

"You're critical to it," is what I told her. She didn't seem particularly mollified.

"And what are you offering in return," Gawd asked. A few of the ponies around us murmured unpleasantly, but I knew Gawd wasn't trying to squeeze me in a time of crisis. She just needed an offering, if only just a token one, to save face. After all, the Talons weren't crusaders. They were a business.

"How about an opportunity to expand your influence into Tenpony Tower?" I offered. "I own what used to be a cheese shop. Perfect place for Gawd's Talons or New Canterlot to set up a satellite office."

Homage's voice rang out over the sprite-bot, sounding slightly tinny. "Oooh, Littlepip. What are you planning?" From her tone, she already knew.

"Life Bloom…" I turned to the one member of the Twilight Society that we had with us. "You're going to have to convince your friends at Tenpony Tower. Once the clouds are cleared in both places, we need the Twilight Society to bring the power of Celestia One down on that battlefield."

Life Bloom blinked slowly. Then nodded. "You can count on me." He added, "On *us.*"

"What's Celestia One?" one of the Wasteland Crusaders asked. Life Bloom explained, leaving out the finer details. But the reality was quickly clear. Tenpony Tower had the ability to enact a megaspell capable of tactical precision, and I was going to unleash it against both sides.

"We're taking back what they stole from us," the amber Crusader said in awe. "And then using it as a weapon against them."

"Yes." I let myself smile just a little at the wonder in her voice before continuing. "Meanwhile, a group of us will be hitting Neighvarro. Once we get to the heart of it, the S.P.P. Central Hub, I'm going inside. I'll be analyzing the cloud curtain and then using the towers to tear away as much of it as I can without threatening the pegasi with starvation."

Morning Frost and Sunglint objected.

I shared a glance with Spike before confiding, "There is a final step to this plan, one that will compensate for the loss of crops, but that's going to take extra time to implement. Possibly months. But we do have that covered."

I looked to Morning Frost. "You were stationed at Neighvarro. Why don't you and Calamity give us an overview of what we are attacking."

Morning Frost floated up her PipBuck and brought up a map of Neighvarro from its database. Velvet Remedy concentrated, her horn lighting up, the illusionary magic she previously used for her concert light shows now trained on presenting a mirage of Neighvarro that everyone could see. It looked like a cloud-bisected egg, the small red alicorn shield of the S.P.P. Central Hub at the core, the blue Enclave energy field surrounding the base like a shell.

We could make out several clusters of buildings including the barracks, the science center and even a collection of solar dishes like those outside of Hope. The base got its power from a combination of those dishes and a field of thunderclouds, the former largely powering the blue dome and the defense array.

Neighvarro was set into a higher patch of clouds than the cloud curtain itself. Between the two, the ominous bulk of the Thunderhead *Victorious* stalked the sky, barely moving. The *Victorious'* four Raptors prowled about it.

"And that's our target?" Paladin Strawberry Knight surmised. "We're here to help you take on that?" She sounded impressed. And a little confused. "How? We can't fly."

"Yeah!" The amber mare jumped up. "How can we help? The Wasteland Crusaders are ready!" Her two friends whinnied their affirmations.

I had no answer for them. I honestly hadn't intended for them to be here.

Pyrelight gave a little hoot and swooped down to whistle into Velvet Remedy's ear. Her eyes brightened. "Maybe you could," Velvet Remedy suggested. "Well, not fly, exactly. But Spike," she shifted her attention to the dragon. "Did you tell us that Twilight Sparkle had a cloudwalking spell? Would there be any chance that spell is somewhere in all these books?"

I'd forgotten about that. With a thrill, I realized that the cloud-walking spell should also allow me to hack into the Enclave computers. Wouldn't help me with their locks since it wouldn't alter my telekinesis or my tools, but this was still a huge improvement.

Spike coughed then puffed up proudly. "Hey, I was the number one assistant of the nerdiest unicorn in all of Equestria. Have you *seen* this library?"

"Wonderful!" Life Bloom jumped up with a grin. "Point the way. If you've got it, I can learn it."

Velvet Remedy cocked her head, staring at him. With a playfully put-out voice, she asked, "Really, is there any spell you can't learn?"

"Not so far," he admitted.

Spike looked the white unicorn over curiously. "How is that? Is your special talent… is it magic?"

Life Bloom laughed and shook his head, his crimson and scarlet curls quivering. "Oh nonono. I'm nowhere near as powerful as even Littlepip, much less a pony like Twilight Sparkle." Powerful? Me? Since when? "But I *am* exceptionally versatile. Turns out, that's my special gift: learning."

Blushing a little, he confessed, "I can learn pretty much anything I set my mind to if I have the resources."

He could have learned *anything.* And he chose to become a medical pony. A healer.

Wow. I hadn't even… wait. Idea! "Spike? Do you, by any miracle, have the Ministry of Magic's research into Spell in the Box?"

"I… think so," the dragon said. "After the briefing, I'll see if I can't find it."

Xenith spoke up gently. "And I can craft some bloodwing talismans," she offered. "But I will not be joining you in this fight, Littlepip."

Calamity, Velvet and I all turned towards our zebra friend in surprise.

Xenith shook her head solemnly. "My place is in Fillydelphia. Stern murdered my husband, destroyed our tribe," she reminded us, no longer trying to hide who she was from Xephyr. "Enslaved me and thrust my foal into the cold, brutal wasteland without protection. If this battle is going to be the end of Stern, then I must be there."

I nodded, frowning a little but accepting that completely. Xenith was right. This was her story to play out, no matter how much I might wish her by my side.

"Now remember, folks," Calamity spoke up, stomping a hoof for attention before flying into the center of the room to hover above the floating mirage of Neighvarro. "These soldiers ain't the bad guys. They're the enemy only in that they'll be shootin' at us. An' it ain't like we ain't invadin' their home." He stared over the assembled ponies and others. "These soldiers ain't done nothing wrong. Many o' 'em will be fresh recruits still bein' trained. They ain't done nothin' t' harm Equestria or its people.

"The ones who have? They're all gonna be in Fillydelphia. An' the pony in charge…" he choked just a little, "…Colonel Autumn Leaf? The one who ordered the Friendship City Massacre an' almost every other atrocity? He's dead, folks.

"We ain't goin' inta Neighvarro lookin' fer blood. We kill only in self-defense." Calamity's words were forceful and brooked no argument. "We ain't goin' in t' slaughter. We're just punchin' a hole."

Another reason I didn't want Lionheart involved in Neighvarro.

And now came the other hard part. I turned to Strawberry Lemonade and the eleven other Applejack's Rangers. "And to answer your previous question: no. You're not going to be part of the assault on Neighvarro."

"Fillydelphia then?"

Again I shook my head. "You're going to be here."

"Here?" Strawberry Lemonade asked, sounding disappointed.

"HERE?" Spike blurted.

I nodded. "Yes. Here. Right here in this cave." I looked up at Spike. "The group of you are going to defend this cave, and its extremely important secrets, from anyone who might take the opportunity to attack while Spike's gone."

"Gone?" Spike repeated in disbelief.

"Yes," I told him. "We need you with us. We can't do this without you. Spike, it's time to stop watching."

He looked between me and the Applejack's Rangers. "But…"

"What would Twilight Sparkle have done?" I asked. From his expression, I didn't need to say anymore.

"Wait," Calamity said. "Yer sending Spike inta battle against the *Victorious* an' four Raptors?"

"Doesn't the Enclave call those *dragon killers?"*

Spike chuckled wryly. "Guess this was pre-ordained. To be honest, I always found that name insulting." He made a wave with his claws, "Part of me always wanted to put them in their place for that."

Morning Frost looked at Velvet Remedy's illusion of Neighvarro. Then stared up at Spike. "Do you think you can take down the Enclave shield?"

Spike lowered his head, staring at the data on her PipBuck. "Magically enhanced Type Six photonic resonance barrier. Let me do the math…" Assistant to the most geeky unicorn indeed.

He sat up, making an elaborate show of counting on his claws, occasionally mumbling something like "carry the three", before leaning back and giving us a wide, dangerous, sharp-teeth-filled grin.

"Oh yeah," he purred. "Probability of hindrance: zero percent!"

I couldn't help but grin.

"And you three," I said, turning to the Wasteland Crusaders. "I want you here, helping protect this place. Just in case."

"And what are the chances of someone attacking this cave in the few hours you are gone?" the olive-coated buck asked.

"Hopefully, none," I prayed. "But while I can't explain why, this cave is the single most important place in Equestria. And it must be protected at all costs."

Paladin Strawberry Lemonade shook off her disappointment and stepped up. "Then we will guard it with our lives. You can count on Applejack's Rangers. None shall pass."

Yes. Everything was shaping up better than I could have expected.

"I'm pretty sure I can't get through the shield around the Central Hub though," Spike added cautiously. "What are you going to do once you get there?"

I opened my muzzle, then shut it again. In truth, the whole thing was a gamble. An educated guess, fueled as much by faith as fact. "I'm going to do what I do best," I told him simply.

"Drop somethin' heavy on it?" Calamity asked.

"Get shot full of holes?" Velvet Remedy offered wryly.

"Stare at flanks?" Reggie snarked.

The voice of Homage floated out of the sprite-bot. "Orgasm?"

Eeep! "Homage!" My ears and cheeks burned like Celestia's sun. When had I fallen on the floor and why were my legs twitching like that?

Scribbling swiftly, Ditzy Doo offered up: *Squeak and blush?*

I could hear the giggles.

Arrrugh! "Okay, fine!" I whimpered, giving up. "I'm going to do something I'm sort of good at." I sighed, covering my face. "Gawd, what I have to deal with…"

"Hey, leave me out o' this one, kid."

* * *

Today:

Velvet Remedy was the first to reach her destination: the Enclave Broadcast Station where the Enclave was tied into the Radio Override System of the S.P.P.

"I'm sorry," she sang out, "Pardon me. Excuse me…" as she dropped each of the technicians in turn with her anesthetic spell. She turned around and propped the doors open wide behind her, then proceeded to look over the controls.

"Now, if I were a shut-down-everything button, where would I be?"

She glanced up as the propped-open doors swung shut again. Then went back to her work. "A-ha!" With a jab of her hoof, the R.O.S. began to reboot. Within two minutes, the overriding Enclave Broadcast was back on the air.

Velvet Remedy trotted over to a microphone, checking the settings on the soundboard, then cleared her throat.

"Hello Equestrians. And good morning," she said sweetly.

"Now I know I'm not DJ Pon3, but I *am* a good friend, and I'm sure sh-sure he wouldn't mind if I entertained you all for a little while. I have some wonderful new music that I wrote myself, but first let me tell you a little about what's going on in the Wasteland today…"

The doors to the station banged open, half a dozen Enclave soldiers bursting in.

Without skipping a beat, Velvet purred, "…starting with the young bucks and mares of the Enclave who just came in to shut me down." She waved at them with her tail. "Pull up a place boys. Let me play some real music for you."

"Back away from the controls, lady," one of the Enclave soldiers ordered. **"Surrender. You're unarmed, and if I see your horn start to glow, we all shoot. Don't make us kill you."**

Velvet Remedy looked put out, pouting with her lower lip and fluttering her eyes. "But boys, I don't need guns or magic. I have something with me that's much more powerful than those." Velvet smiled pleasantly. "Kindness."

The Enclave soldiers looked at each other. One of them started to laugh.

"Kindness? What the hell kind of weapon is that?"

There was a flash in the center of the room. Within the flash appeared a purple alicorn, her horn glowing, her hooves ringed with all the ammunition and power packs from the Enclave soldiers' magical armor.

The air shimmered behind the talkative one, revealing a midnight blue alicorn with a silky, frost-colored mane. The oddly-maned alicorn leaned close and whispered, "The kind that earns you friends."

* * *

Yesterday:

"They need to see," I told Spike after the mission briefing had broken up.

I expected resistance. Instead, Spike agreed readily. "I've already shown Ditzy Doo," he confessed. "As one of the spirits of the Element of Harmony, she deserved to know."

"One o' the what now?" Calamity questioned. He and Velvet Remedy were standing with me, along with Spike, Ditzy Doo and the floating sprite-bot that channeled Homage.

I opened my muzzle to attempt to explain, but Spike suggested we just show them.

Ten minutes later, we were standing before the wonder of the Gardens of Equestria, the sun shining down through the mountain's natural chimney and glowing off the spine of the Crusader Maneframe and its web of cables. The Elements of Harmony seemed to shine in the glow of Celestia's sun, resting on their pedestals.

I had explained it all. Everything.

Ditzy Doo sat at the pedestal holding the Element of Laughter, staring reverently at the necklace with the little balloon-shaped gem.

Calamity was the first to speak. "The spirit o' Loyalty?" He seemed overwhelmed. "That's… a lot. Ah'll try t' live up t' that…"

"You already do," I assured him.

"The Elements of Harmony require many things," Spike reminded him. "But they don't require you to be perfect."

"Kindness?" Velvet Remedy sounded faint. "But… Are you sure?" She leaned closer to me, speaking hesitantly. "In case you haven't noticed, Pip, I can be a bitch sometimes."

I thought back to Velvet's kindness to the dying alicorn at Maripony. To her taking a stance against attacking the hellhounds. To her holding Silver Bell back in her barn.

It had taken me far too long to recognize who was right in front of me. To see both my friends for who they were. In truth, I should have seen it back in Tenpony Tower, when they explained how they felt about each other, both of them expressing what they saw in the other in terms of their own virtues.

"Yes," I affirmed. "I'm sure."

"But… what about Fluttershy?" Velvet Remedy pleaded.

The dragon answered, "The Elements of Harmony are passed on, sometimes even while the former Bearers are still alive. It happened with Celestia and Luna. You're not taking it from her. This is natural."

"You mean… even if she comes back?…"

Spike blinked. "If who comes back? Celestia?"

"Fluttershy."

"What?!"

Velvet Remedy explained. "We can save Fluttershy. Bring her back. Maybe… it's risky but…"

"Fluttershy's dead," Spike said, sounding fairly certain.

"No," Velvet Remedy corrected him. "Fluttershy's a tree."

Ditzy Doo fluttered over, landing between us. She kicked off her chalkboard and took a piece of chalk in her muzzle, scribbling: *What's going on?*

"Velvet Remedy thinks Fluttershy's a tree," Spike explained.

Ditzy Doo cocked her head, one eye focusing on Velvet while the other seeming to stare up at Spike. She rubbed her hoof on the chalkboard and wrote, "Fluttershy was a friend." Ditzy added, "You know she was a pony, not a tree, right?"

"She's not a tree, Velvet," Spike insisted.

"But she is a tree!" Velvet Remedy exclaimed. She turned to Calamity and me for support.

"Ayep," Calamity said.

"Killing joke got her," I explained, affirming, "Fluttershy's a tree."

It took Spike and Ditzy Doo quite a bit of time to process that. This was somepony they knew, a good friend, particularly to Spike. One of his mares. The idea that she was still alive, and that she might even be saved, was a *lot* to take in.

Meanwhile, I had unpleasant news to break to the others. "After tomorrow, your top priority will have to be finding the two remaining ponies with the virtues needed to use the Elements of Harmony and set off the Gardens of Equestria. By your estimation, Calamity, you'll have about a year before things get really bad. I hope you can do it by then."

"Wait," Calamity waved a hoof. "Y'all say that like yer not comin' with us."

My heart felt like it was being squeezed. "I'm not," I said, feeling tears. "I can't." I explained to them, as I had to Life Bloom, that the Single Pegasus Project needed a pony. And that saving Equestria required that pony to stay.

"Why you?" Velvet complained.

I sighed heavily. "Because of all this." I glanced around at the Gardens of Equestria. "Because, in the end, I'm expendable. And you're not."

"Not to us!" Velvet insisted vehemently.

"It's okay," I consoled her softly. "This is… it's the right thing for me." I smiled, tears dripping down my cheeks. "I finally know what my virtue is."

"It's not fair!" she whined.

It does not matter that it is unfair, Xenith had once told me. *It still is.*

Zebra wisdom.

Velvet Remedy leaned into Calamity and cried.

Calamity wrapped a wing around her. "Ah agree with Velvet. Ya ain't expendable. Y'all are a big damn hero, an' our dearest friend." He tipped off his hat. "Y'all do what ya have t' do. But take this with ya. Ah want ya t' have it."

Seeing Calamity's gift, Velvet Remedy floated out the Fluttershy Orb. "And this. From me."

"One year?!" Spike's head jerked towards us. "That's insane! I've been looking for over *two hundred* years."

"An' Li'lpip's found four o' us in jus' under two months," Calamity smiled, looking at Spike with lidded eyes. "Perhaps y'all are doin' it wrong."

Ditzy Doo held up her chalkboard: *He found Littlepip.*

Spike sputtered, stared, and slapped his palm cross his eyes, dragging his hand down his snout, bending it until slipped from his hand and snapped back with a boing. "I've been so stupid!"

"What?"

"I'm so sorry," Spike looked to me apologetically. "You're not unimportant, Littlepip. You're the most important part."

What now?! No. I needed to be unimportant. I knew my virtue and it wasn't any of the ones the Elements of Harmony were looking for.

"I told you that your group wasn't the one that was needed because it was obvious to me that you and SteelHooves weren't ever going to be Bearers," he explained rapidly. But it takes more than just being loyal or honest to be a Bearer…"

Oh crap. You're going to make it more complicated *now?*

"…just like it doesn't require that the Bearers be perfect paragons of their Virtue. There's more to it than that." He looked at us all. "I mean, it's not like the 'destined few' just happened to all live in Ponyville. Fluttershy, Applejack, Rarity… I'm sure there were plenty of ponies with the same virtues, but it wasn't enough to just have the virtues. That wasn't what made them suitable to be Bearers.

"It was only when they accepted the call to act, and became friends in the process, that they became worthy in the eyes of the Elements."

"The Elements 'ave eyes now?" Calamity questioned, taking it a little too literally.

"I've seen it before: the Elements won't work for ponies who don't possess the right virtues, true. Or who aren't friends. But they also don't work for ponies who aren't willing to stand up and truly fight against disharmony and evil."

"They have to fight the Good Fight," Homage agreed.

Spike continued, "It was when they all stepped into the Everfree Forest, braving it together, that they truly started to become friends."

"Well now," Calamity said, "Ah reckon any set o' good ponies who were willin' t' brave danger an' face down evil together are likely t' become friends."

"Exactly," Spike agreed. "There's a word for accepting that call to action: galvanize."

I was lost.

Spike turned to me again. "I was so fixated on how it happened with Twilight Sparkle that I forgot. But even Nightmare Moon thought the spark didn't work, and she was Luna, who with Celestia had been a former Bearer. The only way she wouldn't have known better was if the very nature of the spark changes each time."

I began to glean where this was headed, and opened my muzzle to protest. But the dream-words of Twilight Sparkle and her friends floated through my mind.

It's happening differently this time, isn't it?

Well duh. Do you think it was the same when it was just Celestia? Same is boring.

Ah reckon it's diff'rent every time.

"Last time, it happened inside Twilight. Last time, the spark was an epiphany. This time, the spark is a *pony.*"

Spike stared at me. "Littlepip, *you're* the spark."

But… what… how…

"A *different kind* of spark."

"Daymn," Calamity whinnied. "When the Five are present, a spark will cause the Sixth to be revealed." As everypony turned to him, he grinned sheepishly. "Hey, Ah was payin' attention!"

I dropped to the floor, my head swimming in cloudy confusion… then suddenly clearing like the little pony in my head had performed a sonic rainboom.

At that moment, I finally realized what most of you probably figured out right from the prologue: the true meaning of my cutie mark.

A feature not to be forgotten: PipBucks keep track of the location of tagged objects or people. If a pony somehow got lost, it could help find them.

Like I had found the Ministry Mares. Their stories, which cried out to be remembered. And through the statuettes created through Rarity's sacrifice, the mares themselves.

Like I had found Velvet Remedy, even without the aid of a tag. And I had found each of my friends… and a whole lot of good, heroic people, many of whom were gathered in the main room of this very cave.

I had gotten my cutie mark when I had found that little foal and reunited him with his parents, the first worthwhile thing I had ever done in my life.

My special talent was *finding the right people.*

"But… don't this mean we still need Li'lpip?" Calamity asked suddenly. "We ain't got but four."

Velvet Remedy answered with a hesitant but conviction-filled "No."

She smiled sadly, wiping tears from her eyes. "Have you seen the next room? Littlepip has done her part. We know where to start looking." The lovely charcoal-coated unicorn looked up at Homage's sprite-bot. "And even if the other two aren't in that room, we know where to look next. We look to each pony who has been galvanized to action, to fight the Good Fight, by the example of the Light Bringer that DJ Pon3 has beamed into every corner of Equestria."

* * *

Today:

A spectacular explosion of effervescent purple ripped through the New Hope Solar Array.

"Now that's how we do it down in the wasteland!" Calamity whooped as the defense array fell silent. The rust-colored buck's well-placed explosion had severed both the power connections to the active dishes and to the nighttime reserve batteries as well. Fortunately, he was all but an expert at repairing things, and the knowledge of how to dismantle them came with it. Plus, he had come with a sack full of explosives looted from the *Overcast,* and one special little surprise.

Calamity sniffed at the air. "Well, what do ya know. It's like the end o' an empire… with radishes."

Above, Spike roared, signaling his thanks, as he turned to engage the *Raptor Noctilucent.*

A blast of yellow light scorched Calamity's mane and burned his right ear, the bulk of the grazing shot hitting the wall of the solar tower next to him.

Calamity spun, searching the air above and the spaces between the solar towers. He had flown into the New Hope Solar Array with several pegasi on his tail. Practiced in stealth, he was able to lose them long enough to rig the detonation. He had hoped the explosion would keep their attention as he made his escape.

He spotted the two Enclave pegasi as they opened fire again. They weren't power-armored elite fighters. Just recruits on guard duty.

Calamity dove for cover, darting between towers. His recently healed wing ached badly, protesting the workout. And his body was beginning to feel the lack of sleep from the night before. If they cornered him, he was dead. Or they were. Most likely the latter.

He didn't want to kill these ponies. And that mean running away. Or hiding.

More shots passed above and below him. One struck his armor just above his battle saddle. Dammit. If he could just lose the damn pursuit…

He spotted a door. It could be a dead end, trapping him. Or it could be the perfect place to hide. Or even an escape route.

Calamity made a snap decision.

Dodging and wheeling, he pulled his attackers farther away, then the moment he had some cover, made a hard loop around for the door. His wing screamed in protest, threatening to fail.

Calamity reached the door, only to find it was locked.

"I think he flew back this way," he heard one of the Enclave guards say.

Gall-fucking-dangit!

Calamity heard a heavy barrage of magical energy erupt somewhere overhead. He looked up to see Spike tearing into the plasma cannons of the *Raptor Noctilucent.* As he watched, one of the smaller guns got off a horrific lucky shot, sending a beam of deadly magical energy right into Spike's right eye. The dragon howled, twisting as he slipped off the Raptor, tumbling out of sight.

The door beside him opened, a guard pony flying out to see.

Calamity bucked him over the head, knocking him unconscious, then dragged him back in through the door, closing it behind him.

The rust-colored pony's eyes went wide as he stared at the shelves of tiny, glowing, alien energy cells, each about a hundredth the size of the alien battery used in the star blasters. Above the shelves was a placard, reminding the Enclave pegasi: *Remember, you are first and only line of defense between Equestria and the things that fall from above.*

"Hol-lee shit…"

* * *

Last Night:

"I'm so sorry…" I told Homage, my voice trembling. My friends were all off making their own preparations. It was just me and her, me alone with the sprite-bot in a secluded corner of the cave.

"For what?" Homage's voice was soothing. "You did good."

"I'm sorry for leaving. And… because…" I thought of the dead, all those I didn't save back in the Everfree Forest. "Not good enough."

"Stop focusing on the few you couldn't save and remember that they all would have been dead if it weren't for you." Homage chided. "You saved the wasteland from Taint. And not just what would have been spilled. By obliterating both Maripony and Red Eye's Cathedral, you've protected Equestria from all of this happening again.

"And if you have to count, be sure to count all the ponies whose lives won't be ended in horror or murder because of the evils you have put an end to."

I wept.

"I'm not coming back,"

"I know," she replied, her voice slightly tinny but still the most beautiful thing in all of Equestria. I grasped the sprite-bot between my forehooves, holding it closer and leaning my forehead against its grill, my horn brushing one of the antennas.

"What is the most important thing I give you, Littlepip?"

I was surprised by the question.

"It's not the orgasms, is it?" she prodded.

"No," I quickly insisted. "It's…" I paused, trying to find the words. "The solace."

"Well," Homage told me through the sprite-bot, "Then I think you are a very silly pony."

I blinked back tears. "What?"

"You're about to plug yourself into the central control for all the Towers," she pointed out. "The same towers I use for my broadcasts. You're not leaving me, not where it counts. The S.P.P. is what I do."

I… I hadn't thought of it that way.

"And you'll have access to the entire network," she added. "You'll be able watch over all of the Equestrian Wasteland."

I blinked. The little pony in my head made a quick note to access those records as soon as possible and check in on all my friends. Especially Xenith and Ditzy Doo. I would need to see what happened in the battle for Fillydelphia. The Central Hub should have at least a few recent hours of stored data.

"You're not going to be losing me at all. We'll be closer than ever." Then, bemusedly, she noted, “Although I guess this means I’ll need to find a second home.”

“What?” I asked softly, still processing the new reality.

“Someplace I can modify the way I want, so I can take my showers outside…”

Huh? Why would she do that? To enjoy the sunlight? I opened my muzzle to protest. It didn’t seem safe. A monster or raider with a rifle…

“…you know, where you can watch.”

!

Thud.

From the floor, I whimpered, “Have I mentioned how evil you are?”

⁂

Today:

“…Imagine when the battle’s won,
And we raise our faces to the sun…”

Velvet Remedy’s voice sang, sweet and defiant, in my earbloom as I galloped down the gleaming white hallways of the Enclave science center, protected by the field of the MG StealthBuck II.

She was singing to all of Equestria now. The entire wasteland, wherever there was a radio, they were hearing her voice. The song was a rousing anthem, something to embolden the spirits of Equestria’s fighters. To give them strength.

“…Equestria will live forever!”

Something to galvanize.

I reached the cell block with a few minutes of invisibility to spare. A quick sweep of the area told me all I needed to know. The cell doors had no accessible locks. They were operated entirely from the terminal in the guard office. It had a cloud-interface.

Fortunately, I could do those now.

I slipped into the guard room and started hacking while the two guards were busy talking about the attacking dragon. My ears perked when one of them claimed the defense grid had gone down. My heart leapt. Calamity had been successful.

Which meant that the albino hellhound’s little lesson in explosives had probably paid off. Maybe it was a good thing I didn’t drink that glowing soda after all. I hated to think what it would have done to my insides.

The password was “invincible”. Right.

The terminal brought up the door controls as well as a host of guard alerts. Most of them were from the last twenty minutes and had to do with the currently ongoing attack.

One of them was not.

Disposal Order #34. Subject: Fluffykins.

I didn’t need to read it. I knew what it was. The order was dated this morning, three hours ago. Assuming the guards here weren’t any swifter than they appeared, that meant Fluffykins the Warclaw was still alive. And that the Enclave was about to execute her. After all, their hellhound control had just been field-tested and battle-tested successfully. They didn’t have any need for her anymore.

It was with a sense of justice bordering on pleasure that I opened her cell door, then moments later trotted past, floating a present across the gulf of clouds to the small metal platform she was confined to.

"A present from a friend," I called out as my invisibility failed. Part of me wanted to linger, if only long enough to see Fluffykins open it and make sure she realized what she could do now. There was a note with the present, but I wasn't certain Fluffykins could read.

But I couldn't do any of that. It was time to run. No looking back. I could only hope that I had made a difference. That I had given her a way out that was better for her than what she had been given before.

I wanted to do right.

* * *

Last Night:

I had a big day ahead of me, and the talk with Homage had wrung the last of the energy out of me. I really just wanted to sleep.

The party in the main chamber was not co-operating. I could feel the heavy pounding of drums as much as I could hear them, and Velvet Remedy's chocolate-sweet vocals swam into my ears.

Tonight was the last night before a big battle. One that would define the future of Equestria. And many of them might not be coming back. The party had been Silver Bell's idea, naturally. But none of them were going to spend their last night reading a good book.

"Raise your hoof!" Velvet Remedy's voice called out repeatedly, part of the famous Vinyl Scratch and Pinkie Pie duet.

I tried to bury my head under a pillow. Apparently, Spike had a lot of pillows.

"Hey, Littlepip!" Spike poked his head into the Gardens of Equestria chamber where I had slipped away. "Silver Bell's starting *Pin the Tail on the Pony.* Wanna play?"

I groaned.

"Whoa. Déjà vu," Spike said. "You really should join everyone. It's the last night before… you know. You should spend it with your friends."

I groaned again, but tossed off the pillow and sat up. Maybe Spike was right.

Against my real wishes, I followed him back in the very bright, very noisy main chamber.

And was promptly swept up in the games and festivities.

There was Pin the Tail, and pillow fighting and piñatas. Toy races and table tennis. A bookshelf had been turned over and used as a snack table, covered in every sort of preservative-laden, centuries-old sweet that anypony could get a hoof on, including a huge mound of MoM-approved snack cakes. Velvet Remedy, in all her glory, was belting out one fierce dance tune after another, her horn providing full musical accompaniment and a dazzling light show.

I danced with more ponies and griffins and zebras in one night than I ever imagined I would in a lifetime. And the little pervert in my head got a fair helping of flank-staring during the conga line.

And there were presents. Very special presents crafted by Life Boom, who has spent most of the day studying up on *Spell in a Box.* Cloudwalking presents.

But most importantly, it was *fun.*

That night, that party… I think it was the most pure fun I had ever enjoyed in my life.

Spike had been right. This was better, and so much more important, than sleep. These were moments of joy with *my friends.*

At the end of the party, Life Bloom passed me one last present, wrapped in a pretty bow. "It's what you asked for," he told me. "I need to go back. I'm hitching a flight with Ditzy Doo and Lionheart. If I'm going to make it to Tenpony Tower in enough time to give the little speech I've prepared, I need to go now."

I floated the gaily-wrapped box onto my back. "Thank you."

"Who's that fer?" Calamity asked, trotting up to me as Life Bloom trotted away, swiftly moving to where Ditzy Doo was once again saying goodbye to Silver Bell. A few hours should be more than enough for her to get her glow on, and she hadn't been about to leave before Silver Bell's party.

"It's a gift for Fluffykins," I told him.

Calamity sighted. "Li'lpip, y'know we ain't gonna have time fer that." Calamity was right. We each had our targets within Neighvarro, and we had planned our attack to avoid the barracks. We had to move quickly. No time for sightseeing. But…

"Just this once," I told him, "I want to do right by one of them."

Calamity frowned, shaking his orange mane. Little flakes of color rained out. "Ya ain't gonna be savin' 'er, Li'lpip. Ya let that monster loose, an' she'll rip through every pony she sees 'till they put 'er down." He pointed at the box. "This ain't gonna give 'er her life back."

"I know," I confided. "But if she's still alive, it's what she'd want." She was a Warclaw. She wouldn't want her life to end imprisoned and tortured to death. Who would?

"An' when did ya start factorin' the wishes o' hellhounds inta yer plans?"

I looked into Calamity's eyes. "When I saw how Autumn Leaf treated them."

"Well ouch," he winced. Calamity gritted his teeth. "That was a li'l low. Ah know he was a mass-murderin' bastard who needed t' be put down, but he was still muh brother, and Ah'm mournin' his loss."

I knew Calamity felt the pain of his brother's death, but the idea that Calamity might be in mourning hadn't really sunk in. "I'm sorry," I said regretfully.

"Well," he replied, accepting the apology, "Ah asked."

"You've got confetti in your mane," I told him.

"Ya do too."

* * *

Today:

"Hold it right there, ya traitorous, thievin' scumbag! We're under attack, an' you think it's a good time t' pilfer supplies? You're stealin' from the ENCLAVE ya worthless shit. NO PONY steals from the Enclave!"

Calamity had just finished relatching his saddlebags when the voice tore through the air behind him. "Hello, dad." He turned around to face his father.

The drill sergeant froze, staring.

Calamity stared back, eyes locked with his father.

Then he sighed. "Ya know, Ah always reckoned Ah'd have loads t' say t' ya iffin Ah'd ever have the chance," he said wearily. "But now that Ah do, Ah got nothin'."

The older stallion glared. "Calamity?" Then he raged. "You?! You're the one attackin' yer country? Yer own kind? Yer with the damned DRAGON? YOU!?"

Calamity simply shook his head. "There are so many things wrong with that, Ah don't know where t' start."

"And ya came here, killed ponies, why? Jus' t' steal?"

Calamity glanced back at his saddlebag before answering. "Ah came here t' save ponies, dad. An' these? They're jus' a li'l insurance policy. Somethin' where all muh friends better leave here alive if the Enclave ever wants 'em back." He pushed past his father, heading for the door.

"Hold it RIGHT THERE, you traitorous piece of FILTH!" the drill sergeant bellowed.

"Or what?" Calamity asked. "Ya ain't gonna shoot me. Fer all yer faults, ya ain't Autumn Leaf."

"Ah'll BEAT YER ASS till ya WISH AH HAD!"

Calamity looked back at his father, considering this. "Ey-nope. Ah'm pretty sure ya ain't nothin' but a loud old buck, all bark an' no bite." Calamity offered, "But feel free t' prove me wrong. Ah'm bettin' Ah'll trounce ya. An' that will prob'ly lose ya whatever respect the troops have left fer ya."

He turned away, walking towards the door. "Bye dad."

"THAT'S IT?!" Calamity's father swooped past to block the door. "Ain't ya got nothin' t say fer yerself, ya…"

Calamity cut him off before he could find more colorfully derogatory language to spew. "Ey-nope." Then, with a second thought, he added, "Ah'm sorry mom died. Ah'd say somethin' 'bout how badly ya dealt with it, but Ah reckon ya already know."

My best friend pushed past his father and opened the door.

"Ya got her mane, y'know," his father said softly, letting his traitorous son past. "Ah really liked her mane."

Calamity spread his wings and flew away, saying nothing.

* * *

This Morning:

"So, Barkin' Saw," I asked. "Feeling ready to ride a dragon?"

"Really not comfortable with this," Spike re-iterated as he lowered himself down enough for the hellhound sniper to climb onto the makeshift saddle Calamity had cobbled together while I was talking privately to Homage.

Within minutes, we were flying over the clouds. Spike had me in one of his hands, and I was floating Velvet and Calamity behind us. My pegasus friend could fly on his own, but not well enough or fast enough to keep up with a full-grown dragon.

The world above the cloud curtain was breathtaking. The air was crisp, fresh and warm in Celestia's light. The sun gleamed off the clouds, a rolling canvas bright, clean white. I felt a little wretched knowing I was bringing war here.

As we passed other mountain tops, I spotted one that looked like it had been gutted. All that remained was a gleaming skeleton, like the mountain was a carcass whose bones had been picked clean. I called over to Calamity, pointing it out.

"That there was Stable Ninety-Eight," he informed us. "Weren't many pegasi stables. Most o' the ones we did 'ave were built inta the mountains. Clouds ain't much protection against megaspells, an' pegasi 'ave more need o' vertical space than most ponies, callin' fer a different design."

The bare, exposed remains slipped behind us. "Enclave stripped all the ones they could find down t' the last plate o' metal ages ago." He added, "An' they been takin' what's left from the frameworks as needed."

Several minutes later, we caught sight of a pegasus city. The stark contrast between those buildings – gorgeous monuments to the past – and the ruins I was used to picking through broke my heart. It was a window back into the beautiful, sunlit past of Equestria as much as any memory orb.

But something felt wrong. The city, for all its splendor, was achingly hollow. The ancient, towering buildings and flowing rainbow waterfalls dwarfed its scattering of inhabitants in both scale and grandeur.

The pegasi felt like termites in a tree. Or like mice, carving out their own little mouse-holes within a much greater home.

It was not the thriving civilization I had envisioned.

Spike lowered into the clouds, the dampness plastering my armor to my coat and matting down my mane, the vision of the preserved world immediately gone, replaced with a haze of grey and white. We would travel the rest of the way obscured by the cloud curtain until we were virtually under the base itself.

* * *

Ten Minutes Ago:

Brilliant, blazing light erupted across the sunlit skies over Fillydelphia. Beams of purest sunlight, thin as tree trunks, rained down from the crisp blue like white-hot javelins, incinerating everything they touched.

The Twilight Society guided the megaspell's power judiciously. Instead of bringing the megaspell's full power to bear, destroying the landscape, they wielded it with surgical precision. Celestia One struck down the worst, the most dangerous, on both sides. The goal was not to win the battle, but to end it. And to save as many of the innocent and the helpless as possible.

In the end, the ponies in the ritual chamber decided, they had chosen to do the right thing after all. Not the pleasant thing. Not something, if they had their preference, that they would ever do again. Not something that would make it easy to sleep at night. But the right thing.

* * *

Right Now:

My hoof hit the hard red barrier, sparks of energy crackling out from it. The shield felt as solid as a steel wall under my hoof.

I reared up and slammed my hoof against the shield surrounding the S.P.P. Central Hub once again, and fell on my tail when I rebounded.

I wasn't going through!

But… But I had been so sure! I was three-fifths alicorn. More importantly, I had something nopony who had attempted this had brought: I had a perfect replica of the soul of Rainbow Dash!

Of all of the Ministry Mares, actually. Right here in my saddle bags. If the bones of Luna hadn't been enough to get through, if the Enclave's goal to use the severed head of Rainbow Dash had been attempted and failed, then it stood to reason that the shield's bypass was designed to register something much more important than mere genetics.

I had to be the one who could get in. I had been promised this. I had it all worked out!

This was my purpose. My destiny!

I began to cry. Right now, so many were fighting, probably dying, because they had faith in my plan. Faith in *me.*

How could I have been wrong? Again?

Sunshine and rainbows, she had promised. I heard the sound of explosions and massive energy discharges from the remaining Raptors. My crying became weeping.

I had put so much, risked so much… and on what?

Don't listen to her! the potted plant had insisted. *She just wants you to fail.*

Oh Goddesses! What have I done?

Pinkie Pie's voice came back to me. *Everything will end in sunshine and rainbows!* she announced gleefully. *As long as you're willing to face the fire, that is.*

Face the fire?

I looked up at the heavens, the bright blue of an endlessly deep sky.

"What fire?" I whimpered. I'd already been through Everfree Forest. I'd faced Canterlot, the Enclave, and so much more. "Haven't I already been through enough? Can't I please just win now?"

A dark shadow washed over me.

As long as you're willing to face the fire.

"Spike!" I shouted, waving my forearms desperately! "I need you!"

As the huge purple dragon banked and landed, I wanted to run to him. I wanted to ask him if he trusted Pinkie Pie. Trusted her predictions and her advice.

But I didn't. It wouldn't matter if he trusted her or not. This wasn't about him.

This was *my* leap of faith.

"Whatcha' need, Littlpip?" Spike asked. He looked bad. The Raptors had gotten several good strikes in on him. His scales were scorched or slagged over much of his body. He was having a difficult time sitting up straight. Spike had lost several of his scales, and was bleeding from the blistered pit where his right eye had been.

I walked up to the shield and turned towards the wounded dragon, pressing my body back against the hard field of crackling energy.

"I need you to breathe on me," I told him flatly.

"WHAT!?" Spike roared!

"Please. Just do it. Quickly."

“No!” Spike reared back. “You’ll die! I’m not going to kill you!”

“Please. You have to.”

“No!”

Oh Goddesses. Why are you making me do this.

“I lied,” I told him.

“What?” He looked confused, hurt and deeply worried. In the middle of all this…

“I lied about Twilight Sparkle,” I confessed, my heart ripping apart.

I told him the truth. The whole truth, every awful, soul-wrenching detail.

“All…” Spike stammered finally, his voice just a whisper. “…all this time…”

His face was an apocalyptic storm of emotions. He hated me. And he hated me for making him hate me. In the end, he did the only thing he could do.

He roared.

I was blinded by the blast of greenish flame. The pain was beyond unbearable. I screamed, and my lungs filled with fire. I could feel my skin bubbling and searing away.

I tried to hold onto my most precious memories, my memories of Homage. But one by one, those memories burned away like my flesh, consumed in seering agony until just one was left. The memory of Homage’s last words to me as DJ Pon3, addressing me across the wasteland.

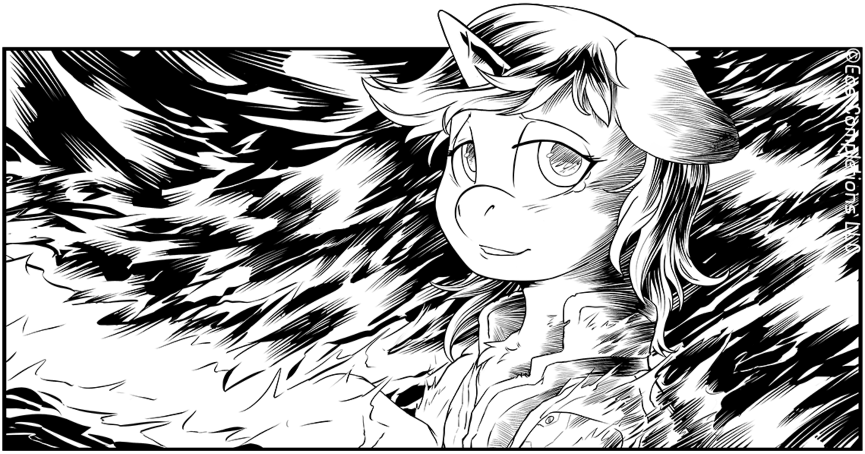
You are my message.

Then that too was gone. And everything else. Even pain.

Footnote: Maximum Level

Chapter Forty-Five

The Virtue of Littlepip



"But it was not until the end of this long road that the Stable Dweller learned the true meaning of that greatest of virtues: sacrifice."

Sacrifice.

The Wasteland will try to tear you down, make you a monster or strip you of your will to fight. The Wasteland… and to a lesser degree, life itself. Every day is a struggle against the forces that attempt to compromise and erode anything good in your heart. It helps to have a cause, a purpose; but I have seen too many who have put their faith in those alone and been lead grievously astray. Every pony has a virtue, whether they realize it or not. And it is your virtue and your friends, together, that form your greatest defense.

Raiders are those who failed to weather the moral ravages of the Wasteland. Velvet Remedy was wrong: they *do* have a reason for existing. The Wasteland is the cause to their effect.

I had finally discovered my virtue. I should have realized it when I first looked into the mirror of the soul. But I was too blinded by what I saw – a blood-coated, dying raider – to recognize what the mirror was actually showing me: the first time I truly acted in the spirit of sacrifice. The time when, even though I stood no chance of survival, I placed myself between a helpless caravan and what I believed to be a pegasus raider intent on slaughtering them.

That "raider" had been Calamity. And that act had initiated the first and closest friendship I have ever known. I should have recognized the truth in the mirror, but it took Pinkie Pie to help me see *how* to see.

You're just looking at it wrong, she told me, pointing to the mirror, but not to me. Pointing instead to the approaching caravan and the family I was giving my life to protect. *Look behind you.*

My virtue is sacrifice.

I believe in Pinkie Pie, in sunshine and rainbows. But of all the Ministry Mares, I think it has been Rarity, not Pinkie Pie, that I've felt the greatest connection to. The mare whose last act was to save her dearest friend. Who tore apart her own soul for those she loved.

My feelings are not surprising, for sacrifice and generosity are closely tied. But generosity is a much grander virtue with a much wider scope. I am not generous. I have never given anything but myself; and upon reflection, my sacrifice was often selfish – a vehicle to protect those I love from facing harm even when it was their right to do so. My mistakes in Fillydelphia are perhaps the most brutal example.

After my final discourse with Red Eye, I began to realize that I had been like an over-protective mother, stifling the growth of those I loved. Only now, finally, was I learning to let go. And still, it was the hardest and most painful thing for me to do. Sending my friends into battle against the Enclave without me… putting Ditzy Doo, the spirit of laughter and one of the most beautiful souls in the Equestrian Wasteland, on the front lines… it tore my heart out to not merely allow others to sacrifice, but to ask them to.

No, I was not truly generous. I was not Rarity, not even Red Eye.

Nor was I truly Applesnack. But sacrifice lies in that space between generosity and perseverance – between the desire to give so that others don't have to and the drive to never give up, no matter the danger, no matter the cost.

I cannot give enough thanks for my friends. They guided me, protected me, and allowed my virtue to blossom into something that just might, in a small way, help save Equestria itself. Without my friends…

Virtues can become corrupted, metamorphosing into dark and twisted shadows of themselves. This is a truth I have both seen in others and felt in myself. Without the fortifying strength of friendship, sacrifice becomes self-destructive, the sort of false nobility that drove me to blindly leave Stable Two, even though part of me believed all I would find beyond the door was oblivion. I quiver to think what I would have become, and what would have become of me, had I not met Calamity when and how I did.

Without the camaraderie of friendship to light the way, it is so easy to get lost. I have observed this, and I have witnessed so much worse.

Monterey Jack committed suicide. That was not the virtue of sacrifice at play, not even a corrupted manifestation of it, but the utterly selfish absolute lack of it. Monterey Jack abandoned everything, even his children, because he no longer had the ability to make even the most simple of sacrifices: living.

Selfishness tells us that it is more important for *us* to have, to get and to not suffer, than it is for anyone else. Just by merit of our experience being ours and everyone else's not so. Generosity is not immunity to those impulses, but an ability to act counter to them, to give to others at the cost of not having for yourself.

Sacrifice demands you put at risk that which you hold precious. To do so even when another might be willing to instead. Especially then, so that no other has to.

I faced the fire, not for my own sake but for the chance to save lives, to remove the "cause" to the war's "effect", and to give ponies across the Equestrian Wasteland something precious, something vital which had been stolen from them.

I hoped that I was helping give them all a better world. And yet, at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder if it was a world I would have any place in?

The mirror had shown me my virtue, but I had not seen it, distracted by the image of what I had become. All the lives I have saved can't wash the blood off my hooves or stop the nightmares borne from all the horrors I have witnessed. When the Overmare had invited me back into Stable Two, I walked away. I knew the truth. That day I truly tasted the virtue of sacrifice and recognized it for what it was.

But I don't think I truly understood sacrifice until today. The day I died.

* * *

I died.

I remember the first time I saw Velvet Remedy. The couple living across the hall from my mother and me had gone to the Stable's "Best Young Talent" show in the Atrium. They'd left their little colt with a babysitter.

According to the babysitter, she'd only turned her tail for a few moments. But in those seconds, the colt had slipped in the bathtub, hit his head and drowned. She called for emergency help; the clinic was only a few halls away, adjacent to the Atrium, and the medical ponies made the gallop in under a minute. Half the Stable seemed to arrive within four, including Velvet Remedy, who had been singing when the news broke. She'd cut her song, rushing along with the parents and the gawkers, to see if the colt was going to be saved.

The colt was revived. Mother said (repeatedly and to anypony who would listen) that the colt had been "clinically dead" for over two minutes. I remember thinking how beautiful Velvet Remedy looked as she tried to follow the medical ponies taking the colt back to the Clinic and was directed away. To think: the crush that set all of this into motion had started that evening.

I died. I came back.

Faith doesn't require you to be willingly blind or dogmatically stupid. I knew as I faced the fire that it was going to be more painful than anything I'd suffered before, and I was almost certainly going to die. But I also knew there was a chance, if only just a chance, that death might be… survivable. And Pinkie Pie had promised me sunshine and rainbows. Faith *does* require that you take risks. Sometimes, you have to risk *everything.*

I said I would burn It, Rarity had insisted to Applejack after the other mare had called her on still having the Black Book. *And I tried… I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.*

The Black Book. A soul jar bound with a living soul. If It could survive the trip, soul intact, then there had been a chance, if just a chance, that so could I.

Returning from death by incineration was, admittedly, more severe than coming back from drowning. And a whole league beyond re-growing a leg.

I came back.

Didn't I?

Everything was darkness, like the nothingness I had once feared was outside the door of my Stable home. The darkness was cold. I wasn't in pain. But I could feel myself breathe. Feel the beat of my heart. The press of my clothing and the weight of my saddlebags on my back.

I also felt cold, polished rock beneath my hooves.

The room around me rushed into being the second I realized my eyes were closed and, in doing so, instinctively opened them. I swayed, hit with a tsunami of intense relief that left me feeling strangely euphoric (and more than a little bit foalish).

I was in what I guessed to be a reception room. I chose to assume I was in the Central Hub of the Single Pegasus Project. If this was heaven, it left a lot to be desired. If it was hell, then hell was lame.

I was in a sizable, circular room with cool azure walls visible between cloud-white columns rising from a mist-covered marble floor. Above me, clouds floated in patterns beneath a dome of hazy, slate blue. The walls were covered in painted snowflakes, each with a beautiful, clear gemstone set into the center. A shower of diamonds.

There were railings, counters and carved marble furniture, all covered with a glistening sheen of frost. The room was chilly, but not freezing – the frost itself was enchanted, radiating the cold that filled the chamber. The frost had slowly spread to cover much of the columns and patches of both the walls and the ceiling. In another fifty years, the entire room might have been covered.

There were two exits. Behind me, a set of gabled, silver double-doors which matched the ones I had seen on the exterior of the Central Hub while I was banging on the shield. Opposite those grander doors was a single, small, unassuming door which must have lead further inside.

A latticework of metal and icicles arched between two of the pillars between myself and the smaller door. Three huge monitors, each nearly the size of a pony, were mounted on the latticework, their screens a dull, dead grey.

A nearly identical latticework arched between the two pillars nearest the set of silver doors. The icicles formed words between arching bands of silver: *Winter Vestibule.*

But, my little pony protested irrationally, *it's summer.*

Against a far wall, I spotted a few empty wall-vendors and a Sunrise Sarsaparilla machine. A bottle of sarsaparilla stood on the arm of one the chairs next to me inches from the bones of a forehoof; the magical coating of frost on the chair had turned the liquid contents ice-cold.

All about me, collapsed on the furniture or scattered about the floor, were the skeletons of ponies. Those on the floor formed small islands of bone in the mist. Maybe a dozen in all.

I trod carefully. If my suspicions were correct, one of these skeletons might be the former body of the Goddess Celestia.

I winced as my hoof came down on the metal clamp of a clipboard. Looking down at it, I was struck by nostalgic memories of Calamity and SteelHooves joking about Stubbornite. A small smile played across my muzzle before I refocused my attention.

Spike had, to my knowledge, never sent anything to anypony other than Princess Celestia. I had only my faith in Pinkie Pie's words that, this time, his fire would take me where I needed to be in order to bring sunshine and rainbows back to Equestria. I could not deny that the reason it might do so is because that location, and Celestia's final resting place, might be one and the same.

The shield around the S.P.P. was designed to let either of the Princesses through. And I had never found Her bones in Canterlot. It seemed to me that if She had died there with Her sister, then Nightseer would have probably been wearing both. Although perhaps not; perhaps, as the alicorn's name suggested, she had a particular affinity for the Princess of the Night and Moon.

Near the silver doors was the corpse of a mare. Not a skeleton, like the others, but an intact body, her eyes opened wide, staring at nothing. The "Winter Vestibule" was not cold enough to freeze the body, but the chill was enough to dramatically slow decomposition. Still, I suspected she had not been here for more than a few weeks. (And it disturbed me deeply that I had become enough of a connoisseur of death and dead bodies that I felt I could make such estimation.)

There were no marks, no wounds or signs of trauma. Like me, she was not burned. She was just dead, her eyes wide open, as if in mortal terror. Had she, my mind conjectured, died of shock? When I faced the burning death of dragon's fire, I had been hoping for this. I had no doubt that, for her, it had been completely unexpected.

As I reached out a hoof, gently closing her eyes, I wondered what her last thought had been. My hoof froze an inch from her face as it struck me that I might know those eyes. Though weeks of slow decay had rendered them strange, they could have been the eyes of that one Enclave mare – one of the intruders into the dragon's cave – that Spike had slain.

I… didn't understand.

Why was she here? And if she was, then why wasn't the room full of propeller parts and everything else consumed by Spike's breath?

I stared at the decomposing body of the mare in confused dismay. I had faced the fire of a dragon based on faith, thin evidence and a cripplingly desperate lack of options. If she was sent here the same way, then something must have made her different, just as something had made *me* different. But she wasn't guided by a precognitive voice from the past. She wasn't the Lightbringer. She wasn't even a message.

…But then, in a twisted way, wasn't she? Spike had certainly been trying to "send a message" to the Enclave. A dull pain began to thud in my mind as I thought about it.

Did forces such as destiny, purpose and intention play a part in dragon magic? If so, then it was not in the way ponies conceived of such things. Maybe they mattered in a more mysterious and nebulous existential way. I doubt Spike *intended* to send this mare anywhere… any more than he had planned to send the Black Book.

I felt a sudden weakness in my knees as I glimpsed the breadth of my lack of understanding. I felt suddenly like I had taken my leap of faith without even grasping the idea of gravity.

The chill of the room began to seep in as I stood over the Enclave mare, deep in thought. I recalled part of a tale Spike had told us: how a hiccup had sent a bundle of scrolls tumbling down on Celestia's head. It was an accident… but they were scrolls. Their purpose was to bear messages. The Black Book itself desired for its influence to be spread.

Or maybe this dead mare wasn't who I believed she was, and I was just spinning nonsensical wheels in my head.

How does she get in and out? I had asked Lionheart, looking at a pink-warped glass ball which had, centuries before, been designed to hold a small pet.

Dragon magic.

I winced, an unpleasant ache in the back of my brain. Dragon magic. One more thing to add to the list of Stuff That Makes My Head Hurt. Right up there between Enclave politics and rock farming.

But still below pony-pulled train engines.

I finished closing the mare's eyelids down over her staring, lifeless eyes. Then, shuddering slightly from more than the cold, I rotated about and started towards the small door.

Even from across the room, I could see I was in trouble. The door had a cloud-lock. If it was locked (and when was anything ever easy), then I couldn't open it. The cloud-walking which had allowed me this far wouldn't affect either my tools or my telekinesis, neither of which could interact with clouds.

My trot dropped to a slow walk as I began to realize that I had come all this way, risked so much from so many, and I might be stuck forever in this cold, tacky room.

The three screens erupted into life.

Above me, glaring with an expression of cold and evil rage, was an ebony alicorn. Her vast black wings filled the screens to the left and right. On the center monitor, her turquoise, dragon-like eyes stared down at me with utter contempt from behind a helmet forged of bluish metal.

"You trespass in the sanctum of Nightmare Moon!" she said icily. **"I give you this one chance. Leave. As swiftly as your little hooves can carry you."**

I backpedaled in shock, my hooves stepping into the ribcage of a skeletal pony, causing me to trip and sumersault backwards, coming to rest awkwardly against the rotting corpse of the unknown pegasus.

Nightmare Moon.

Or, I quickly suspected, a security system designed to emulate her.

Rainbow Dash had formed the Shadowbolts. It made sense that she might have drawn on similar iconography when designing the internal security for her Ministry's greatest project.

I planted my hoofs firmly on the cool floor and glared back at the screens full of Nightmare Moon.

"I… I'm not turning back now," I announced.

"You cannot continue!" Nightmare Moon insisted. **"And I will strike you down if you try. Turn back now, while I'm still feeling generous enough to give you the chance!"**

And exactly how would I do that? Was she going to drop the shield to let me out?

A bar of static crept up the left screen, distorting Nightmare Moon's right wing.

It didn't matter.

I turned away from the three screens, casting my gaze about the room. I couldn't pick a cloud lock. But maybe I didn't have to. Maybe, somewhere in this room, there was a key.

"What are you doing?" Nightmare Moon demanded.

Ignoring you, the little pony in my head thought as I began to search the room. The cloud lock probably meant a cloud-key. I had to find it while the spell persisted and I would be able to pick it up in my hooves or teeth.

Panels slid back on the frost-encrusted ceiling. Ceiling turrets dropped down, threatening but not yet taking aim. **"Stop that!"** the image of Nightmare Moon cried, insisting, **"There's no other way inside. Don't waste your time."**

I couldn't help it. A smile broke across my muzzle. "Oh, but there is," I told her. "Know how I know? Because it's making you nervous."

The image on the right screen flickered with static then righted itself.

Wait. Security programs can't get nervous.

I turned to face the screens, my eyes growing wide.

"Last chance," the face of Nightmare Moon warned me, full of regal anger. **"Leave now!"**

"No. I'm not leaving!" I told her defiantly. "Because the lives of good ponies are at stake. Because the evil attacking the innocent has to be stopped. Because Equestria deserves the sun…"

I stepped towards the screens, watching as a wave of distortion warped the images of Nightmare Moon. "I'm not leaving because this is my destiny," I stomped, staring coldly at the flickering images of the evil, black alicorn. Looking into those dragon-like eyes, as if willing my gaze beyond the screens, beyond the façade.

I took a deep breath and spat out, "And because *you* are not Nightmare Moon."

The screens flickered and the images of Nightmare Moon vanished, to be replaced with a much kinder visage.

"Destiny is what you make it to be," Celestia told me.

I told myself this was another layer of the security program. This wasn't actually Celestia. The gentle Goddess had transcended death, rose up to the heavens. Even now, She was watching over all the ponies of Equestria. Hearing our prayers. Not… this.

This wasn't what I believed.

"Stop with the games," I spat crossly.

"Get out!" the image of Celestia commanded, spreading feathery white wings across the right and left screens in a stance of royal dominance. "This place is not for you."

I shook my head. "Get out how?"

"However you got in."

My jaw dropped. She… it… didn't know? "Weren't you paying attention?" What sort of crappy security system was this? "Spike sent me. Sorry, don't have another dragon in my saddlebags." The Celestia-image mouthed Spike's name, looking surprised.

"You had yourself burned alive?" the voice of white alicorn asked softly. Wide, lavender eyes stared at me through the center screen.

"Besides, wouldn't he just send me…" Wait.

Slowly, reluctantly, I asked, "You *are* Princess Celestia, aren't you?"

"Yes, my little pony," the majestic image of the white alicorn said. A line of static started to crawl across the center monitor. "And who are…" The alicorn trailed off, seeming to really look at me for the first time. "Wait. Don't I know you?"

"Know me?" I repeated, feeling like I was losing the ground beneath my hooves. "Why would you know me?"

"I watch… so many ponies," the image of Celestia confessed. "In my prison, all I can do is watch and listen. Until, sometimes, I cannot bear to watch any more…"

Prison? That… oh Goddesses.

Was I actually believing this? That I was speaking to Celestia Herself? That the Goddess… Princess… was somehow trapped here? Why else would She refer to this as a prison? But that meant…

"…But I do remember watching you before," Celestia interrupted my epiphany, her voice taking on a motherly tone, almost gentle but not without an edge. "You are Littlepip, she of the colorful vulgarities, am I right?"

Of the…?! EEEP! Celestia knew me… and for *that?!* I wanted to hide. But there was simply not enough everything in the universe to bury myself under.

"The pony on the radio has had good things to say about you," Celestia continued, my embarrassment compounding with Her mention of my inflated reputation.

Of course She had been hearing everything Homage had said, and all the DJ Pon3's before her. They had, after all, been tapping into the S.P.P. towers to broadcast. Using Twilight Sparkle's emergency broadcast station no less. *All I can do is watch and listen.*

"You are not like the ponies who have sought to enter this place before. The horrible things they did in their efforts to get inside…"

I winced, the little pony in my head cringing in sympathetic heartache as I imagined what it must have been like for Celestia to see an alicorn wearing Her Sister's bones. "I put Luna to rest," I told Her quickly, wanting to ease the harmful memory. "I burned Luna's bones, and slew the monster who desecrated Her."

My words felt weak and pathetic in my muzzle, but the expression on Celestia's face was of such undeserved gratitude that I found myself bowing before Her just to escape it.

"Rise, my little pony," Celestia chided softly. "I am no one worth your deference." I glanced up in surprise at Her melancholy words, not moving from my position. "There are too many dead because of me for any pony to show me such reverence. I would bow to you if I could."

I stood up quickly. "What? No!" I was appalled and, to my surprised, a little cross. "What happened wasn't your fault! The war, the megaspells, the horrible things we have done in your absence… none of it is your fault!"

Celestia merely looked at me sadly. Her perfect voice began to soak with the sound of the tears she couldn't really shed. "But it is, my little pony," She insisted. "I chose the site for Luna's school. There were three sites equally suitable, but I chose Crescent Moon Canyon because it amused Me. Because I wanted to see My Sister's face when I told Her I was sending Her students to the moon…"

And now I could see tears in Celestia's eyes, static warping the image on the central monitor. "I put those children there for a *joke!*"

I… I hadn't imagined…

My nerves felt covered in ice. My eyes burned. I felt the heat of a tear trickle down my right cheek as I began to cry for my Goddess.

"And that's not the end of it," Celestia claimed. "When the zebra's struck, Luna and I worked together, holding up the shield, giving all our subjects time to get to their Stables, even though the Cloud was killing Us. We took shifts, at first, each of Us holding the shield while the Other gathered healing supplies, then while the Other just rested…"

Sacrifice.

"…but My Sister," Celestia's voice trembled, "was younger. Weaker. And no matter what I did, I couldn't prevent Her from dying in My arms." Tears streamed down from Her quivering lavender eyes. I held Luna until Her body grew cold…"

Oh Goddesses… Goddess. Luna have mercy on Your Sister.

"…and then, stricken with grief, I flew away. I abandoned dead Canterlot, letting the shield fall, unleashing a fatal flood on the poor towns below."

Applesnack died, I recalled painfully, in the seconds that followed. He hadn't seen Celestia's flight from the Royal Castle, but that could be forgiven. He was focused on the horrific wave of pink coming to consume him.

As terrible and painful as Her confessions were, Celestia was not finished. "I… I was blind with grief, with the loss of My Sister. But as I flew over Whitetail Woods, I saw zebra megaspell missiles, three of them, heading towards Canterlot. The zebras were not content to murder Luna; they intended to obliterate the city that had become Her grave. To wipe the entire mountain off the map. To utterly *erase* Her…"

I remembered the words of SteelHooves: *I heard rumors in the days after the apocalypse that after the shield fell, the zebras launched megaspells to finally obliterate the city. But if that is true, then those missiles never reached their destination.*

Whitetail Wood.

Kage used t' call it the most poisoned place in Equestria.

Timidly, I heard myself squeak, "What did you do?"

"I destroyed them," Celestia said, her sad voice taking on a hard edge, "My grief turned to rage, and I tore them apart. Reduced them to dust as I flew between them."

Good for You! the little pony in my head said with an angry stomp.

The blade of anger evaporated from her voice, leaving only regret. "The winds carried the radiation and poison of those weapons across all of Whitetail Wood, covering Equestria's once beautiful forest and poisoning the reservoir. All the way to the edge of Ponyville."

As Celestia spoke, my thoughts traveled back to my first minutes outside the Stable – to just how sick and poisoned Sweet Apple Acres had been, the very ground making my PipBuck click.

"My rage…" Celestia bemoaned. "When it left me, I felt like I had been stripped of My flesh, My heart. My soul was raw. And… I was afraid." The expression on Celestia's face was unfathomable. "I was dying, and I was afraid."

I wanted to hug Her. To bury my head in Her royal white coat and weep. For Her. For Luna. For everything.

"I should have let Myself die," Celestia said. "That way, at least, I could have been with Luna. But I didn't. I was selfish. I've lived so long that death, ending, was alien and horrifying to me. So instead, I let my cowardice bring Me here…"

Here. The Single Pegasus Project.

"That's not cowardice," I offered earnestly. "That's… normal." The idea of anything about the Goddesses being normal was jarring to me. "We all fear death. That's part of being a pony." With a second thought, I added, "It's part of being alive."

Celestia seemed mildly thankful for my effort. "…and as a reward, I have been trapped here, in My prison, My purgatory. Listening to the victims of My sins, unable to act. Unable to help." She seemed to look past me, Her gaze shifting across the bones. "I've done what I could to prevent anypony from becoming like me. And to prevent those camped outside from gaining access to this place."

I opened my muzzle. Tried to say something, to protest, to find some way to console

Her. She listened for a moment before gently cutting me off. Instead, a voice I had heard months ago filled the Winter Vestibule.

"Hello? Is there anypony out there?" the long-dead stallion asked, his voice heavy with resignation. He didn't really expect the help I knew he would never receive.

> *"Please, we need help! I was bringing my family to the Stable up near Sweet Apple Acres when we were attacked by raiders. Only my son and I survived. We made it to the Stable, but it's still sealed up. There is no way inside. My son, he ate one of the apples from those damned apple trees up near the Stable, and now he's terribly sick. Too sick to move. We've holed up in the cistern near the old memorial. We're running out of food and medical supplies. Please, if anypony hears this, help us… Message repeats."*

I was struck by a ghost of the realization I first had hearing it. The unnamed father had already lost hope, and by the time he made that recording, he was just going through the motions.

And Celestia had been hearing that broadcast, reciting the death of a colt from the poisons She had spread across Whitetail Wood, playing over and over again for who knew how many years. Until I came along and shut it down.

I broke down crying.

Celestia wept with me.

"You are not like those camped outside," She repeated when my resolve to complete my mission overrode my sorrow and I finally began to wipe my tears.

I knew She must have meant the Enclave. It struck me as odd that She wouldn't have known who I was when I first appeared. She didn't seem aware of the battle raging just beyond the shield, or the purpose of my appearance.

All I can do is watch and listen. Until, sometimes, I cannot bear to watch any more.

"Celestia," I asked gently. "When did You stop watching?"

Her answer should not have surprised me.

Friendship City.

It had been the Equestrian Wasteland's darkest hour. If I had been watching, unable to help, I believe I would have averted my gaze too.

It took me a few minutes to fill Celestia in on what She had missed.

"What… what did happen to You?" I finally asked, my voice cautious. I tried to brace myself for whatever answer would come. I needed to know, but I didn't think I could bear hearing of even more of my Celestia's pain. "How is it that You are here? Like this?"

My first assumption would have been that Celestia had entered the control pod Herself. But if She had, wouldn't She have done a long time ago what I intended to do now? And hadn't the Ministry of Awesome's systems confirmed that the Central Hub was empty?

"I came here," Celestia told me. "I knew My body was dying. But I knew of the Crusader Maneframes, of the chance for continued life they offered. So I came here." She looked askance. "Part of Me had hoped that, in taking control of this place, I would be able to help all my little ponies. That I could still do some good to try to make up for my failures. But when I downloaded Myself into the Maneframe, I found Myself trapped. Helpless. I have control over a few security systems, but that is all. I can only listen and watch."

Downloaded?

My forehooves raised to my muzzle as I gasped.

None of that download-your-brain nonsense, Rainbow Dash had explained to Luna. *I had them disconnect all that stuff. I want a living pony running Equestria's weather, not some machine that* thinks *it's a pony!*

"Rainbow Dash… Apple Bloom…" I said weakly. "Celestia… they disconnected the mental download system from the controls. That was part of the design." I had known this, but I had imagined they would have removed that part of the Crusader Maneframe completely, not left it intact but severed.

Spike had once asked me: *Have you ever heard the old saying 'The portal to hell is opened with the incantation of good intentions'? If there was a moral to their story, I guess that would be it.*

"I know that now," Celestia said mournfully. She had made a mistake. A simple, understandable mistake with numbingly tragic consequences.

It was the story of Equestria's fall in miniature. DJ Pon3's words rang in my head. The one great reality of the Wasteland, the truth of the matter: *every pony has done something they regret.*

The rational part of my mind reared up. If that was what had happened, then this wasn't really Celestia I was talking to. It was just a program. Just the illusion of memories. Downloading your mind into a Crusader Maneframe doesn't actually put *you* into the computer. It just makes a copy of your brain. The only way that…

I thought of Elder Cottage Cheese and his unholy intentions. He had planned to truly live forever by not only turning the Crusader Maneframe into a duplicate of his mind, but then transferring his very soul into the machine. Using it as a soul jar.

My face rose towards Celestia, my eyes opening in terrible realization as Rarity's words once again whispered through my mind.

I even tried to have Spike burn it. All that did was send it to Princess Celestia.

Princess Celestia had, for a limited time, been in possession of the Black Book.

"You…" I stared, aghast.

"Yes," Celestia confirmed regretfully, not even needing to hear the question. "The spells were so easy to learn that I knew them the moment I opened those pages. And how could I have resisted just a look?"

I felt a black chill.

"When you live as long as I have, boredom becomes an enemy," She explained. "In its own way, as dangerous to me as Discord. Especially when I was alone."

Celestia sighed. "In the centuries after I banished Nightmare Moon, I turned to learning everything I could about the mysterious, the secret and the forbidden. I even learned tidbits of zebra alchemy and dragon magic – those few things which a pony such as Myself could possibly perform. Later, I even built a school to teach the things I had learned which where safe."

Dragon magic? Was that how She sent scrolls back to Spike? I couldn't help but ask.

"Yes," She told me with a nostalgic smile. "I learned that from the dragon you now know as Mouse." She continued, "The secrets of the Black Book were a temptation that played on centuries of habit."

No wonder the shield around the S.P.P. Central Hub was so invulnerable. No wonder it had lasted so long. It was being powered by Celestia's *soul.*

Another thought occurred to me: this was it, then. I was never getting out. Not that I had ever intended or expected to. In the very least, I couldn't leave until the threat of the Enclave was dismantled entirely. It did no good to end the war today if it just started again tomorrow. Still, the reality of my eternal incarceration was like a heavy blanket.

Yet I held my head up. I would never see my friends again. I was going to be hated and villainized by the pegasi. But it was all going to be worth it to bring the sunlight back to Equestria. To stop the Enclave…

…hell, it would be worth it just for Silver Bell to get to see real rainbows.

I stepped towards the small door. My only regret was that I wouldn't be with Homage again. That I wouldn't be able to hold her one last time.

I stopped, looking up at the screens. "Can I see them?" I asked. "My friends? From in here?"

"Of course, my little pony."

My heart leapt, the little pony in my head bouncing about with unexpected anticipation. My first instinct was to ask about Homage. But I had a friend for which I felt a much more pressing concern.

"Please, Celestia," I begged. "Show me Ditzy Doo. Show me what happened to her. I need to know if she's alright."

Princess Celestia vanished, Her image replaced by scenes of the battle for Fillydelphia. Each monitor showed footage recorded by the S.P.P. towers, two showing recent events while the third played in real time.

I watched as Ditzy Doo, like a golden-green light of hope, rose out of the Fillydelphia crater and flew up through the clouds. And I watched as she came back, her sonic radboom clearing the skies over Fillydelphia, allowing the rays of Celestia One to strike. I watched as she fell. And I cheered when Lionheart caught her.

On the central screen, I could see Ditzy Doo, right now standing on the overturned hulk of a chariot, gazing wall-eyed over a sea of scrambling slave-ponies, her blackboard in her teeth:

This way to freedom and muffins.

Beyond her, a gaping hole had been torn in the wall, the wreckage from the barrier used to bridge the moat of toxic sludge. Lionheart was standing beside the passage to freedom. Near his hooves, a dozen monsters from the sludge-moat lay dead, their pink-tainted corpses surrounding a triumphant-looking white fieldmouse.

"Thank Celestia!" I said without thinking.

Then, blushing, I asked, "Show me Xenith?"

The screens changed. I watched my zebra friend infiltrate Fillydelphia until she had reached Stern. I saw the fight that began on the rooftop of the Ministry of Morale and that ended on a gabled rooftop on the far side of the city.

I looked on as, right now, Xenith lay bleeding and barely conscious under the cover of a cave formed from rubble as her daughter, the doctor of Glyphmark, tended to her wounds. In the background, the sky erupted with light as a concentrated sunbeam flared down from the heavens and detonated an Enclave bombing wagon.

If Celestia One was working, then that gave me hope for my other friends as well. "Could you show me Reggie, please? And Life Bloom?"

The monitors replayed the sight of Gawd's griffins clearing the sky over Tenpony Tower, interspersed with glimpses of the Twilight Society. (Celestia was somehow able to show me inside the megaspell chamber!) The left-hoof monitor was showing Gawd and Reggie as they flew towards the roof of Tenpony Tower, supporting a wounded Blackwing between them.

"If I do become Arbiter of a New Canterlot Republic," Gawd was telling the wounded griffin, "I would be honored to have you as co-council."

"Don't you think you should choose a pony for that?" Blackwing suggested. "You wouldn't want to give the impression that Equestria is under griffin control."

It took me a moment to realize that they were missing someone.

I turned to the other monitors in time to watch the fight begin. I felt a sharp pain as I looked at Butcher and realized she wasn't going to survive. I gasped when Reggie was struck by the poisonous tail. And whooped when she shot back up through the clouds with *Little Gilda.*

"Who would you suggest then?" Gawd asked on the left screen as the surviving trio neared the rooftop. A pony galloped out onto the roof to greet them.

I heard Reggie's voice. "Life Bloom?"

"Enough," I said with a wave of my hoof, not needing to see any more. Those who survived the fight would recover, but we had taken losses. I knew we would, but that didn't lessen the hurt. If anything, we had gotten lucky that it wasn't much, much worse. "Show me Velvet Remedy?"

On the central screen, the beautiful, charcoal-coated unicorn was singing into a headset as she trotted between wounded Enclave soldiers lined up inside the protective barrier generated by several green alicorns. She had set up a triage for the enemy, helping out everypony wounded in the battle. As I watched, a purple alicorn teleported inside the shield, bearing another fallen soldier. Velvet Remedy interrupted her song once again, rushing to the wounded pegasi's aid.

The side-monitors displayed how Velvet Remedy had taken over broadcast center. Without a shot fired or a pony wounded.

I had never felt more proud. Joyous.

And yet, my knees felt weak and a nervous sweat broke out over my body as I asked timidly, "Celestia, please… show me Homage."

This time, only one screen lit up with a view of the wasteland. Celestia reappeared on the other two, watching me tenderly.

I could see contrails of black smoke in the sky. The camera shifted downward, zooming in on a ridge of rock. Amongst the rocks was a small cave, little more than an indentation, that somepony had built ramshackle walls into, and sparse furniture, all scaled for very small ponies. A little sign was nailed to the front, the word clearly painted by a young foal.

ROCKOPOLIS
No fillies allowed!

Through the almost-rectangular window, I could see a very dirty, very haggard Homage, her mane in filthy, tangled strings, curled up amongst a few empty cans of centuries-old tomato paste. Hiding.

I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

Then, impossibly, Homage shifted. She looked up. Right up at the camera that was high on a tower so far away that she couldn't possibly see it.

Her muzzle opened. And she mouthed the words: "I love you, Littlepip."

I broke down crying again.

"Homage has been using the towers for a long time," Celestia reminded me. "She knows them." And somehow, my Homage… the mare who had seen ghosts, found weapons from space and had encounters with strange ponies who lived in blue boxes… could feel that she was being actively watched.

My horn glowed and I floated up to the monitor, pressing my hooves against it, just trying to be closer. "I made it," I told her. "I burned alive, but I'm okay."

"She can't hear you," Celestia said.

I lowered my hooves, still floating next to the screen as I drank in the sight of the mare I loved.

With that, Celestia informed me, "I could send you back."

A portal of green dragon fire erupted in the room behind me.

"Back to Spike. You could be with her tonight."

"What?!" I fell back to the floor with a thud. I *couldn't* have heard that right.

But I had. The green fire behind me, Celestia explained, was like that which She had once used to send messages through Spike. Once I burned to death again, Spike would literally burp me out, alive and whole. Indescribably painful but… efficient. And a little bit gross.

"Now that you know how to get here through dragon fire, you can return to your friends and your loved ones," Celestia offered me. "You can go, help them with their fight, and send someone else in your place tomorrow. You don't have to do this anymore."

The image of Homage flickered away, replaced by the sight of Celestia's gentle, caring eyes.

"You deserve to be happy."

I found myself faced with two choices: the small door that led deeper into the S.P.P. or another death by dragonfire, this one able to send me back to my friends.

It was almost too much.

"I can't!" I told Her, almost wailing. "We'll never get this close again. The Enclave is too strong. They'll regroup… and if we don't win today, they won't give us a second chance."

"The magic of Spike's fire is not short range, Littlepip," Celestia claimed. "You don't have to get this close again."

I rocked on my hooves. That was true. And I wanted so much to be with Homage again. To be with all my friends. I didn't want the life I had grown to love, despite all the pain and the horror, to end here.

That's natural, my little pony echoed.

I thought of my talk with Velvet Remedy two days ago. How could I ask from somepony else what I wouldn't give myself?

Especially, my little pony added, *when it means asking them to die for you. Even if it* might *only be temporary.*

"Everypony I know…" Of the ones I could entrust something like this to, at least. "… they all deserved to be happy too. Just as much, or more, than I do."

I stared at the monitor where Homage had whispered her love, and I thought of what Homage would say. I couldn't help but snicker as I realized she would probably ask if I'd been staring at Celestia's flank.

Celestia raised an eyebrow as I began to giggle.

I giggled because I knew what Homage would say if she could see me now. She wouldn't beg me to step through that fire. She wouldn't ask me to be with her at the cost of another.

Nor would she feel the need to push me to stay. All the things she had to say on that subject she had already said last night. She'd trust me to make the right decision. No need to hammer the point.

"You're laughing?"

I nodded, failing to stifle a chortle. "Because I know if Homage was here, she'd probably tell me: Don't do anything too naughty with the Goddess until I can figure out how to make it a threesome."

Celestia's eyes went wide. As I realized what I had just said aloud, and to whom, my face broke into the fiercest blush. But Celestia's expression caused me to collapse in laughter.

"You have… an interesting mare-friend," was all Celestia could manage to say.

It took me a moment to recover, wiping tears of an entirely different sort from my eyes. I knew what I had to do. On the other side of the shield, Spike believed he had killed me. I couldn't imagine what he might be feeling, or how he would react when my friends rejoined him. I couldn't leave him like that.

Concentrating, I floated up the clipboard, searching for ink. Finding none, I shattered the Sunrise Sarsaparilla bottle with a hoof and used one of the shards of glass to draw blood, ignoring the slight pain (compared to burning alive, a small cut was *nothing*), and using my blood to write a message:

> *Dear Spike,*
>
> *I'm alive.*
> *I'm inside with Celestia.*
> *Thank you. I'm very, very, very sorry. Please, some day, forgive me.*
>
> *Littlepip*
> *PS: It hurt a LOT.*

Without a word, I sent the message back through the portal.

Celestia watched in silence. When I was done, She smiled at me. "I'm proud of you, Littlepip. But I'm holding the fire open for you."

"Why?"

"Because I know now where I've seen you. Twilight's last act was to save you," Celestia informed me. "Was it for this? For you to give up your life just a week later?"

She who I had worshipped as a Goddess was trying to dissuade me from my mission. Not because I was not worthy, but because I was worth too much?

"Life is a gift," I told Her. "I'm not so selfish as to ask anypony else to give theirs up so

I don't have to."

"Life," Celestia remarked sadly, "is not always a gift. And death is inevitable. Or, at least it should be. Even my Sister died." The melancholy in her voice was unbearable. "That's the real evil of the Black Book. It changes that. It steals death from you and calls it a gift. It's lying. I've lived so long, alone, watching ponies die. I've seen more than you could know. Please, trust Me when I say that the ponies you save by sacrificing yourself will die soon anyway."

I couldn't believe my ears. This was not the Celestia that I worshipped. "What are You saying?"

"I'm saying… isn't it better for the gift of a slightly longer life to be given to those who have truly earned it, who deserve it most? Isn't it better to hold onto those you love?"

As hurtful as it was to hear these words from the One who was supposed to be my gentle and loving Goddess, She… wasn't without a point.

"And if the war I allow to continue today should kill Homage tomorrow?" I asked, "Or kill the pony another loves, somepony else's Homage? How could I live with that? And how deserving would I be of another day? How could You even ask?"

"I…" I could hear the undercurrent of pain in Celestia's voice. "I suppose I've always played favorites."

I thought of her favorite student. "And… what would Twilight Sparkle do, if given this choice?" I felt immediately awful for invoking Twilight, realizing how much that must hurt Her. What right did I have? Particularly after what I had done?

Celestia fell silent. I wondered if I had driven Her away (for whatever quality of "away" Her prison allowed Her).

"When Twilight was younger, she wanted to do what you are doing. She wanted to brave the Everfree Forest alone. To not risk anypony else," Celestia told me. "Her friends would not let her. After that? I'm not sure. I'd like to believe that she'd stay with her friends, and they would work a way through it together. But…" But the Ministries.

I felt a flare of protective anger. Was Celestia suggesting my friends had failed me? Or was I reading too much into those words?

"But her friends," I pointed out, "were also willing to step back and allow her to do what she had to do. Even if that meant, for a moment, leaving her vulnerable."

"And you know what happened," Celestia replied gently. "Twilight was always weakest when separated from her friends. And you will be too."

I felt the presence of the statuettes in my saddlebags. They were stronger together. Better.

Oh! Ooooh. Oh, Goddesses… or Goddess, as the case seemed to be.

I began to understand. Not just what Celestia was saying, but why She was saying it. I began to grasp why Celestia had become so different from the Goddess whom I prayed to.

"Celestia…" I began cautiously, "How long have you been without your friends? How long have you been alone?"

Again, Celestia was silent. Then, after a long and somber pause, She answered. "Longer than I've been here."

"You don't have to be anymore."

"Littlepip…" The eyes of the alicorn on the screens widened.

"Nopony should be alone, Celestia." Not even one like you. "Ponies need friends. They need the… the magic of friendship. Without it…" I trailed off. The ponies of Equestria had lost their sun in more ways than one. But I could change that.

"I'm here. And I'm not leaving you."

Celestia said nothing.

The green flames evaporated.

The small door unlocked and opened, revealing a short hallway leading to another door. Inside the hallway, a small alcove held the download device. The metal helmet, encrusted with lights and gems, was laying next to the long-horned skull of a large, winged pony skeleton.

Celestia's skeleton.

I took a few steps forward, then stopped. Focusing, I wrapped the bones of Princess Celestia in my magic and floated them out into the Winter Vestibule.

"Please," Celestia asked, "As you did for My Sister."

It took me a little while to find a way to set the bones on fire, but eventually the pyre crackled. I realized I would need to do the same for each of the skeletons in here before I settled into the control pod. But I could burn them all together. Celestia's bones deserved the honor of their own fire.

Sitting beneath the monitors, I watched the funeral, Celestia watching with me.

I was startled when a mechanical whine started somewhere in the Central Hub and hidden fans began to suck the smoke from the room, replenishing the Winter Vestibule with fresh, summer air. Between the fire and the air, the enchanted frost began to melt and the fog on the ground faded away.

Finally, I stood up again. It was time.

As I walked into the hallway, Celestia opened the final door.

The Crusader Maneframe of the Single Pegasus Project reminded me of a tree. The large, central stalk glistened with running lines of mystical energy. Lights blinked in arcane sequences along branches that stretched out from the trunk, connecting to smaller maneframes that lined the walls. The metal oval of the control pod was nestled amongst root-like conglomerations of wires,. It struck me simultaneously as being like an egg, fallen from a nest and cracked, and a rabbit hole, dug into the base of a tree, leading mysterious places.

Three other doors marked cardinal points. The writing above them claimed they lead to the Spring, Summer and Autumn Vestibules.

A stray memory flittered through my head like an errant butterfly.

Okay, here's another one, Spike had said, telling us stories of his long-gone friends, the Ministry Mares. *This is the story about Twilight Sparkle's first Winter Wrap-Up.*

What's a Winter Wrap-Up? Calamity had asked just before the shaken-up Sparkle~Cola I had passed to him hosed his face.

I chuckled as I remembered his expression.

In the aftermath, Spike had explained that, normally in Equestria, the changing of the seasons had been accomplished in part by magic. Later, I had heard Rainbow Dash bemoan the need to abandon the war effort once a year to help with Winter Wrap-Up.

Somehow, I had forgotten the scope of what the Single Pegasus Project was designed to do.

One part of Winter Wrap-Up, the part Applejack had always been in charge of, was planting seeds for the next year's crops. Even that, I realized, was under the Single Pegasus Project's purview. That was, in fact, part of what the Enclave had hacked into, altering it to fit their needs. Cloud seeding.

This was going to be a *big* responsibility.

I lifted the hatch to the control pod, looking inside at what would be my new home. The interior was plush, comfortable. Like a cloud, but solid. Just in case the operator wasn't a pegasus, I suspected. Likely thanks to the oversight of Apple Bloom.

The headset looked an awful lot like the one in the hall. But there were enough differences to distinguish the two. No flashing lights. Quite a few more gems.

I concentrated, my magic unfastening my saddle bags and letting them drop to the floor. As I removed my armor, I opened those bags for the last time, floating out the small number of keepsakes I had brought with me. Treasures full of memories and ghosts.

Calamity's hat. The Fluttershy Orb from Velvet Remedy. The drawing by Silver Bell. Gifts from my friends.

One by one, I set them down in a circle on the interior edge of the control pod. I wanted them close to me while I "slept".

Little Macintosh. The statuettes of the Ministry Mares.

Never did learn what finally happened to Rainbow Dash, the little pony in my head mused. *Probably for the best. It's good that there are still some mysteries.*

The ashes of the filly from Friendship City.

And finally, Orb #8.

That last one I set next to the headgear. The very last thing I would do before closing the hatch and sliding into a controlled coma was to watch it. I knew it would take precious time, but never seeing it was one sacrifice I wasn't willing to make.

I wasn't a *paragon* of my virtue, after all.

I looked at Calamity's hat. The memory from our first visit to Spike's cave had reminded me that there was one friend I hadn't looked in on yet.

"Please, Celestia, if you would," I asked as I trotted back out into the Winter Vestibule, "show me Calamity."

The screens changed to pictures of frantic battle. On one screen, Calamity was dodging pursuit as he tried to plant explosives in the New Hope Solar Array. On another, he was facing off with an Enclave officer in some sort of store room. On the third…

Spike flew across the screen, the camera turning to track him. Between two of his clawtips, I could see he was clutching the clipboard.

I heard the explosive report of Spitfire's Thunder. Calamity was strapped onto Spike's back with rope, as was the hellhound Barkin' Saw. My pegasus friend's wing had been inexpertly wrapped in healing bandages; he'd overstrained the healing limb and now it wasn't working at all.

Together, Calamity and the hellhound sharpshooter were sniping incoming missiles before they could reach the dragon.

"If Li'lpip's okay, then let's get Velvet an' get outta here!" Calamity shouted as he fought to reload. "Fall back t' y'all-know-where."

Blood dribbled from Spike's destroyed eye. A painful grimace crossed his bloodied snout. “The Enclave know me,” he growled despondently. “They know where I live. Soon as word gets out, they’re going to retaliate.” Calamity understood the severity of Spike’s tone when he said, “They’ll hit the cave. With everything they can.”

My heart skipped a beat. The Gardens of Equestria!

“Ayep,” Calamity said grimly. “That’s why we pull everythin’ we got back there. Form a line o’ defense.” As Spike banked to avoid a barrage of plasma fire, each bolt wider than a pony, Calamity scrambled not to drop the anti-machine rifle. “All we gotta do is keep ’em out ’till Li’lpip can clear the clouds. After that, we got Celie-One as a defense!”

I felt a surge of panic and fought it back down. It would be hours before they even got back to Spike’s cave. Longer before the Enclave could regroup. But the sense of urgency that I had somehow allowed to slip had returned in full force.

“Celestia,” I asked, realizing how much there would be to do. “Will you help me?”

“Of course, Littlepip.”

I walked out of the Winter Vestibule and back into the small hallway. I paused at the alcove with the downloader.

“They won’t understand,” I said, realizing it not for the first time. “The pegasi especially. They won’t understand why.” Not that it mattered. I was trying to do the right thing for everypony, for every*one,* the only way I knew how.

I heard Scootaloo’s voice in my memories.

This isn’t our Equestria anymore! It’s not the happy, safe, pleasant world any of us grew up in. I don’t understand how it could have gotten this way. H-how… how it c-c-could have gotten this bad! Somepony needs to figure it out! And fix it! And…

And if I have to become the villain of the piece to do that, then I will.

I was Scootaloo. At least a little.

“I’ll be able to watch everything, right?” I asked. “Will I be able to talk to them? Or, at least, send a message?”

Celestia was quiet a moment. Then, “Not as the system is now,” She informed me, “Or I would have done so long ago. But with a good toaster repairpony, that will be easy to fix.”

My ears burned a little but the little pony in my head pranced in glee.

I looked at the download device. It was meant to make a copy of a pony’s entire mind in a few hours. How quickly, then, could it make a simple copy of a couple months?

“I want to send a message,” I told Celestia as I wrapped the helmet in my magic, turning the download station on. “I want to tell them what really happened. To explain. Even if they never believe me. I owe them all that much.”

Again, I asked, “Will you help me?”

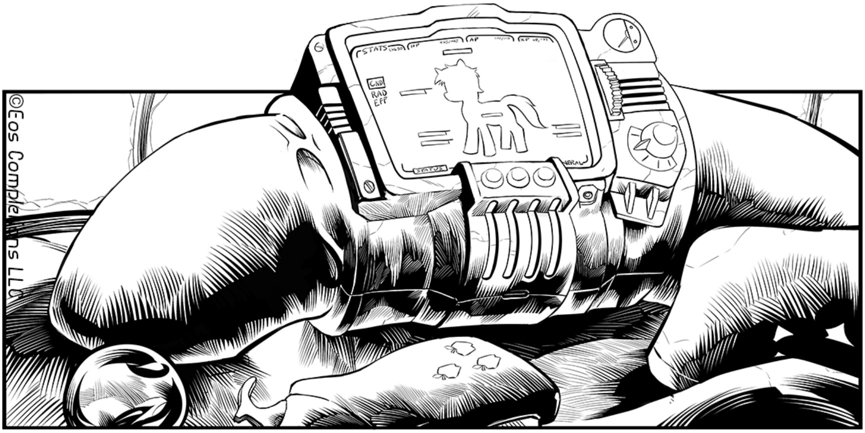
Again, the answer, “Of course, my little pony.”

Two months. The copy process should only take minutes. Add an hour for editing and adding in a few thoughts…

I slipped the helmet onto my head and started up the arcano-tech device. I felt the odd sense of mental “pressure” as the device synced up to my brain, and experienced an odd taste, like that of muffin-flavored cake. I took a deep breath as I tried to figure out just how to begin.

Then I began, thinking:

If I’m going to tell you about the adventure of my life – explain how I got to this place with these people, and why I did what I'm going to do next – I should probably start by explaining a little bit about PipBucks…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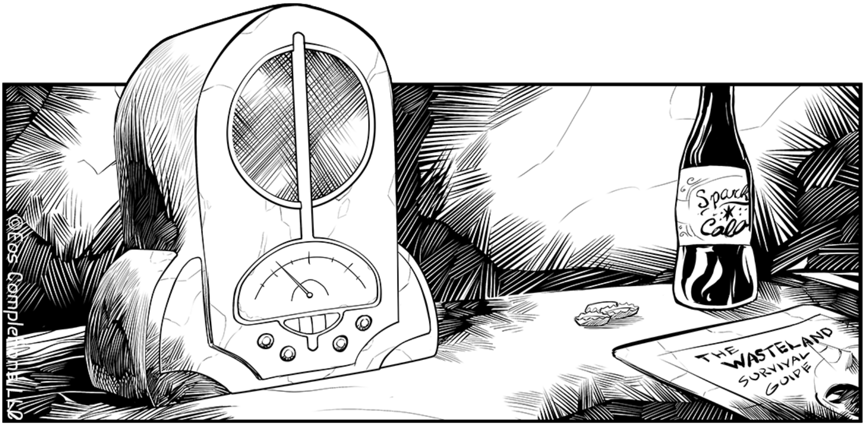
EPILOGUE

Of Forgiveness and Fallout



Two weeks!

It's been two weeks since the afternoon that Wastelanders everywhere have come t' call the day of sunshine an' rainbows. The day that massive surges of rainbow light an' sound – sonic rainbooms – burst from twenty-three of the great towers, clearin' away the blanket of clouds that had covered the skies above for all our lives, an' the lives of everyone an' everything born after the great war.

For me, there's a memory that will forever symbolize that day: I looked up, watchin' those expanding rings of fantastic rainbow light burst the clouds, sending showers down on the Wasteland. And as I turned my face towards the sun for the very first time, I saw how the misty rainfall sparkled. And then, I spotted a balefire phoenix, her coat a majestic, iridescent emerald an' gold, dancin' an' cavortin' amongst the ephemeral rainbows forming all across the sun-drenched sky.

It was the single most beautiful sight I had seen in my long life.

Thank you, Littlepip. From all of us.

Now children, as you know, the sonic rainbooms also tore most of the remaining Enclave Raptors out o' the sky. The few that remain have returned t' the sides of the Enclave's remaining Thunderheads… and turned their firepower on the pegasus ponies who have risen up t' throw off the Enclave's tyranny.

The war is over, but it would appear that the war was just the prologue t' another bloody chapter in Equestrian history. Civil war tears apart the sky; and here below, the remnants of Red Eye's armies have divided into war camps, each determined t' carve out a swath of the Wasteland as their own little empire, the ground soaked in violence an' the blood of anypony who challenges them.

But this time is different, children. Because this time, we have hope. Hope that the Equestria of tomorrow will actually be a better place than the Equestria of today. And that we may actually know peace in our childrens' lifetime.

Hope brought t' us by our Lightbringer, yes. And more importantly, hope brought t' us by ourselves. By our embrace of our nobler nature. Over the last few weeks, the actions of so many of you have shown more brilliantly than the sun itself, so much that it's made this ol' DJ cry. Children, ol' DJ Pon3 ain't never been prouder of ya.

Now listen up, children. Ol' DJ Pon3's got a message for all you faithful listeners, an' this one's important. The word of the day is "forgiveness".

We've all suffered at the hooves of the Enclave. And I know just how easy it would be t' direct all our hate towards every pony out there with wings. But the Enclave ain't every pegasus. An' even a great many of those in the Enclave weren't keen on what their leaders were doing. Many stood up against them, an' many were murdered for it. We need t' embrace our pegasi sisters an' brothers, welcome them. Things are gonna be hard for them. Hell, hard for all of us. We need t' show love, tolerance an' acceptance. We need t' be the sort of ponies the Stable Dweller trusted an' believed we could be. The sort of ponies you've proven you can be.

Same message goes for the alicorns. They ain't the monsters they used t' be. They're ponies, hurt ones at that. Yes, there are several poisonous apples out there – some o' them just don't seem t' know any other way. But most of those alicorns are just lost. They're trying t' figure out who they are, t' reckon their place in this world. (Not unlike a certain little unicorn who stepped hoof out of a Stable less than three months ago.) And there are some, more than just a few, who have chosen t' side with the heroes of the Wasteland. So if you see an alicorn, keep your weapon loaded, but try talking first. You just might find a friend.

Remember, children, it's the one great truth of the Wasteland: we've all done somethin' that we regret. We all need a little forgiveness. And that's the truth of the matter.

And with that said, I've got a special treat for all of you faithful listeners. I have here in the studio Velvet Remedy, here for a rare interview with yours truly. I know I usually farm out interviews t' my number one assistant, but this is a special case. And Homage has been rather busy.

But first, some news!

The fires of Everfree Forest have finally died. Bizarrely, a lot of the forest, the trees at least, seems unharmed. Given time, the undergrowth is likely t' grow back. However, I have it on good authority that the Applejack's Rangers have taken up a project t' convert much of the forest's area t' farmland, pending negotiations with the Children of the Cathedral, a relatively non-hostile band of Red Eye remnants who have made their home in the wreckage of the Thunderhead Overcast.

In related news, hostilities between the Steel Rangers an' their heroic offshoot, the Applejack's Rangers, seem t' have ceased, save for a few localized pockets of fighting. Apparently, the threat of genocide from above has helped put their conflict into perspective.

Fierce battles continue throughout the ruins of Fillydelphia, most notably between Talon mercenaries and the emerging Red Eye remnants' warlords. Unless your checklist of things you need t' do by the end of the day includes violence an' bloody dismemberment, I strongly advise you t' avoid Fillydelphia for the foreseeable future. If you are amongst those civilians still trapped inside the ruins, seek out the nearest Talon not engaged in active hostilities. If at all possible, the griffin will do her or his best t' get you out of the warzone.

Now, as many of you know from my first return broadcast, all those mysterious towers turn out t' be part of a pre-war weather-control system called the Single Pegasus Project. And that Littlepip, the mare I formerly referred t' only as the Stable Dweller (and other titles), is *currently in an induced coma, hooked into that system. Additionally, Celestia Herself is bound, in mind an' soul, into the S.P.P.'s security system. So, I guess everypony who believed that Celestia was up there somewhere looking down on us was right.*

And that brings us t' a bit o' good news… and a bit o' bad news.

Y'see, Littlepip was willing t' sacrifice everything she had for all of us. Her friends honor that… but they're doing all they can t' mitigate the price. Cuz that's what friends do. They help each other, best they can.

Despite the best o' efforts, it doesn't appear control o' the Single Pegasus Project's security an' weather-control systems can be integrated. Turns out, even if we had the technology, attempting t' install it would require a full shutdown and tearing 'part several components of the Crusader Maneframe. And… that ain't an option.

The good news, however, is that they've rigged up enhanced communication between the disparate systems. Not only does this mean that Littlepip and Celestia will be able t' share time together, but that both will be able t' periodically converse with us *down here as well.*

Sunlight and Celestia Herself have been returned t' the Wasteland. Words… they just ain't able t' express the magnitude o' that.

And in further good news… the first message from Littlepip t' all of us has been received. Now, it's a bit of a mess due t' the way it was mentally transcribed, but the Twilight Society's expert in memory magic – a pony who I will add is a trusted friend – has taken it upon himself t' sort an' edit the memory dump; an' we expect t' have that message available for everyone livin' in the Wasteland within another two weeks.

(And before you ask, my friend has assured me that the editing being performed will not diminish the message in any way, that it ain't gonna be a short message by any stretch, but that nopony needs t' know about every time Littlepip ate or had a bowel movement. To my friend, I can only say: I applaud your sacrifice.)

Finally, a bit of personal news: I, your voice in the Wasteland, am going away again. Hopefully, it will not be for as long as my last "vacation", an' it is definitely under better circumstances. You see, children, now that the war is over an' the sky has opened, I've got a quest of my own t' undertake. A role in the Good Fight that demands my personal attention. I'll report in whenever circumstances allow, but this may be the last bit of news you hear for a little while.

Now, I hear some of you faithful listeners askin': hey, DJ Pon3, does this mean Littlepip is up there keepin' an eye on us all the time too, like a new, benevolent Goddess?

Well, I can tell you she wouldn't much care for the comparison, an' the last thing she wants is t' be prayed to. That's not a role she seeks for herself. Plus, I have it on good authority that she'll be gettin' some long an' well-earned rest.

On the other hoof, even though I know she ain't that kinda pony, I'd still hesitate t' throw 'round the ol' "may lightning strike me if" phrase quite so casually now. And I, for one, am already buildin' up my stockpile of colorful Littlepip swears!

An' on that note, I introduce Velvet Remedy! Hello, medical pony! May I call you Velvet?

Of course you may. We're going to be traveling together for a while. Familiarity is expected.

Heh, yes. As it turns out, faithful listeners, Velvet here will be accompanying me on my little sojourn. As will her husband, Calamity: hero of the Battle of Dragon Mountain. How is Calamity doing after his surgery, VR? Can I call you VR?

No. And he's recovering nicely. The implants are compensating for the permanent muscle damage, and I believe that he will regain his full flying capabilities with sufficient exercise and nagging.

Ah yes. The nagging, I suspect, is the most crucial element to recovery.

Did I hear you say "enhanced" communication? Well, that explains it. I thought I heard Homage saying something about the towers, spare parts from Stable Twenty-Nine and… a threesome?

Hey, is it my fault the mare's a perv?

Not touching that one. And you know why.

Ha! Anyway, let me first say how joyous it was t' hear your broadcast that morning two weeks ago. Ol' DJ Pon3 ain't never been so happy t' be upstaged.

W-what? I didn't! You weren't even…

Whoa. Just a joke. But it's no joke that your voice was a blessin' in a pretty dark hour.

Oh! Thank you. I just did what I could.

And from what I hear, you got a little quest of your own that you're rearin' t' take on before we all begin our little adventure. Why don't you tell us about that?

Yes. We're going to try to save Fluttershy.

Fluttershy was one of Equestria's greatest heroes, and eventually became one of the Ministry Mares: the Mare of the Ministry of Peace. She was the gentlest healer and the kindest soul that Equestria has ever known.

Yes, she made mistakes, errors in judgement, that played a role in the apocalypse. But her mistakes were borne of kindness and a genuine effort to save lives. The portal to hell is opened with the incantation of good intentions. And what she has suffered in the last two centuries has been beyond the pale. The punishment has far exceeded any crime.

Tragically, a Wasteland specialty. Fluttershy sounds like the sort of pony the Equestrian Wasteland really needs. What happened? And how can she be saved?

Two centuries ago, she was brutally transformed by killing joke. It may be possible to reverse that cruel magic and save her. For the last week, Xenith has been working on a brew – a modification of an old recipe to relieve the transformations caused by poison joke – and it is finally ready.

Morning Frost has volunteered to fly us out. (I don't want Calamity pulling a sky chariot until he has fully recovered.) The fires of Everfree Forest should have cleansed the area of killing joke, but we're not taking any unnecessary chances.

Now Velvet, I hate to bring this up, but it has been two hundred years. What is the chance that this will even work? And even if it does, she might not survive the transformation. She might die of old age the moment she is restored.

We… I know. But Fluttershy deserves our efforts to try. And even in the worst case, she deserves peace. After two hundred years of undeserved torment…

Sorry… please… give me a moment.

Take your time.

I…

Thank you. I'm alright.

Hey, no problem. This is understandably emotional. You were saying?

I was… about to say: just in case, we've created a recording that we are going to play for her before we attempt this. The recording is from all of us… I believe your assistant

Homage took part in making it and helped Littlepip and Celestia add their voices as well.

The recording lets Fluttershy know that we love her. And, perhaps more importantly, that for the mistakes she made, she is forgiven.

We're going to play this for her before we try the brew. And afterwards, if we are not successful in saving her, the recording will be integrated into a gravestone marker, set to play once a week, at sunrise, for the next ten years.

That's… kinda beautiful. Of course, I really hope that it isn't necessary.

Again, thank you.

No, VR. For all you've done, and all you're going to do, from all of us in the Equestrian Wasteland: thank you!

In that case, everyone deserves thanks. We all did our part.

And, if I may ask, how are you doing in the wake of it all? I know that, since your return, you've seemed a little… melancholy.

Really? Well…

A lot happened. To me. To you. To Equestria. Can't go through all that and come out the same pony. But that's just… life. Life always changes.

Aaaaand… I'm afraid that's all the time we have today, faithful listeners. Ol' DJ Pon3's got some packin' t' do, an' I need t' program a good week or three o' music before I go. One final announcement: earlier, I was able t' spend some time with Velvet here in my recording studio; and startin' today, Velvet Remedy's Equestrian Anthem *will be part of our musical rotation.*

Knew you'd enjoy hearin' that!

But for now, I leave you with this song, an ol' favorite. I dedicate this one to Strawberry Lemonade, Amber Waves, and every other pony who gave their lives at the Battle of Dragon Mountain. You stood fast, defending valiantly without even knowing what you were dying to protect. Only trusting that your sacrifice was for the good of all Equestria. Your bravery and loyalty are unparalleled. And I promise you this: you didn't die in vain. Someday very soon… as soon as my little quest is complete… everyone will understand your sacrifice. And history will remember your names with reverence.

Thanks for listening, chiiiiildren!

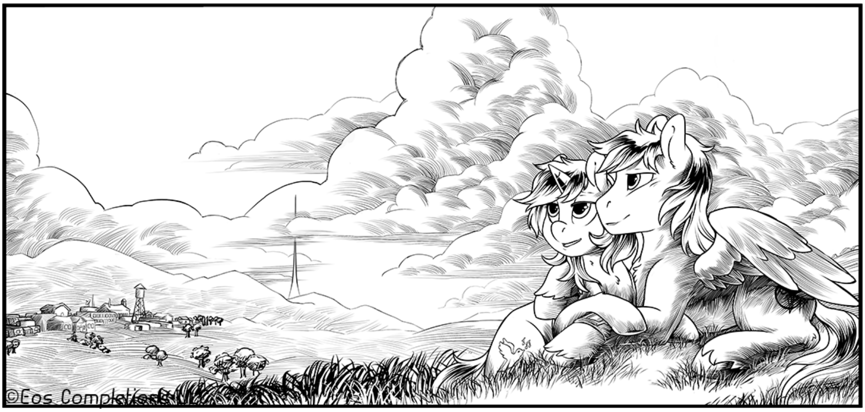
"I want to calm the storm, but the war is in your eyes.
How can I shield you from the horror and the lies?
When all that once held meaning is shattered, ruined, bleeding
And the whispers in the darkness tell me we won't survive?"

"All things will end in time, this coming storm won't linger
Why should we live as if there's nothing more?
So hold me 'neath the thunderclouds, my heart held in your hooves,
Our love will keep the monsters from our door."

"For I know tomorrow will be a better day.
Yes, I believe tomorrow can be a better day…"

AFTERWORD

Ten Years Later…



Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria…

"Then I began, thinking…" she said softly, reading the very last lines of the book. They were also the first lines, although she wasn't sure if any of her listeners had noticed. The story had come full circle.

These were the moments she lived for. Just spending time with the children. Seeing their eager, attentive faces as she read to them. The reading room was like an island of peace. No worries, no pressures, no ponies seeking her advice or counsel. She had never been comfortable in a position of leadership, but the ponies outside had put her on a pedestal. She hated the spotlight, and she knew she hadn't earned the trust they put in her. The reading room was one of her favorite retreats.

"…If I'm going to tell you about the adventure of my life – explain how I got to this place with these people, and why I did what I'm going to do next – I should probably start by explaining a little bit about PipBucks."

She gently closed the book, drinking in the tranquility of the ending. Yes, these were the moments she lived for. The peace and quiet before…

"What?" whined the little apricot pegasus sitting in the center of the other foals. "That's *it?* It can't end there! That's a lame way to end the story!"

"Now Thunder Rush…" she began. Rush was Tracker and Mist's filly, and had inherited her father's disposition.

"I want action!" Thunder Rush interrupted. "And I want Rainbow Dash!"

A timid yellow unicorn offered, "I kinda like the ending."

Rush rolled her eyes at her playmate. "You would."

Well, it was tranquil while it lasted. "Now children…"

"It's a true story, right?" the yellow unicorn, Flower, asked.

Even as she nodded in response, the filly Thunder Rush promptly disagreed.

“Of course not! It’s *obviously* just a fairy tale. Nopony could survive getting shot *that* much!” The filly rolled her eyes again with exaggerated exasperation. “And come on. You don’t really believe there were *that many* monsters in Equestria, do you?”

“Oh, but there were,” she responded, hating to interrupt. “I was there.”

The apricot pegasus just crossed her forelegs and sat down with a harrumph.

One of the colts in the back, a brown and white spotted foal, piped up, “Were you really a tree?”

She took a deep breath, fortifying herself to face the question that always came after this one. “Yes, Cliff. It’s true.”

She heard curiosity in Flower’s voice as the filly asked, “What was it like to be a tree?” And there it was. The question.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Fluttershy said, the words feeling rehearsed. There were things she couldn’t think about too much. And her time as a tree was high on her list of forbidden thoughts.

“Now why don’t you all go out and play,” she suggested.

Most of the colts and fillies didn’t need to be told twice. The far doors swung open, letting in a dazzling blast of sunlight. A miniature stampede left the reading room almost vacant in seconds. She blinked, realizing that little Cliff had stayed behind. The colt galloped up to her on his tiny hooves and threw his forelegs around her. She fought back the urge to jump away and hide.

“You’re the best storyteller, Miss Fluttershy!” he said happily. “Thank you for the story!”

Then the colt too was drawn by the pull of the midday sun and scampered off to join his friends.

Fluttershy stood in place for a moment staring out the open doors at the mission and at Junction Town beyond. These ponies, they called themselves the Followers of the Apocalypse. They knew of her past, her great mistakes, but they neither hid from the truth nor hated her for it. Instead, they embraced it as a lesson. And still, astoundingly, looked to her with a reverence she found uncomfortable.

Still, if she was going to be given a position of authority, she was going to use it. She’d spent two hundred years unable to do anything to help anyone. No more. She just… had to do better this time. And this time, she was going to stay close to her friends so that they could help her.

She spotted the Followers’ leader, Velvet Remedy. The charcoal-coated unicorn looked her way, smiling. She lifted a forehoof and waved. Fluttershy waved timidly back, her eyes catching the ornate golden PipBuck, encrusted with a nightingale-shaped gemstone, on Velvet Remedy’s foreleg. She remembered when that had been a necklace. Her necklace.

She found herself smiling, happy it had found a new Bearer. Although it had taken her a while to grasp the somewhat abrasive mare as a beacon of kindness.

She wasn’t surprised that the Element had taken a new form. After all, before it was a necklace, it had been a heavy, round rock. And the book did help explain why the Elements chose this new appearance.

Fluttershy picked up the book in her mouth and walked over to the bookshelf.

The Book of Littlepip was a good book, she thought, despite some of the darker parts that she had to skim over when reading it to the kids. The book had helped her understand things, answered many questions.

Xenith's potion had reversed the curse of the killing joke, restoring her physically to how she had been just before it touched her. But her mind…

It had taken years for her to recover, and she had only been able to find herself again, to put herself back together, thanks to the constant attention and help of her friends – both her new friends and her old ones.

Velvet Remedy had been right. The little statues of her friends had helped her put herself back together. Without them, she probably would have remained broken, insane, forever. The statuettes of her friends were the second set like that she had been given in her life. The first was from Rarity. The ones she had now were from Velvet Remedy. With them, she could weather the loss of her friends. And it felt sometimes like they were still right there with her. Sometimes, in her sleep, they would stand by her against the monsters that lurked in her head.

She hadn't understood how or why until Velvet Remedy had given her *The Book of Littlepip*. Now, thanks to the book, she knew. It was, however, rather disconcerting to know that there were little statuettes of her out there somewhere, radiating the essence of her soul.

The statuettes were in her saddleboxes. She took them wherever she went, taking them out only to put them on the mantle above her bed at night before she slept. With Angel.

The eternally petrified form of her dearest pet and longest friend watched over her each night, guarding her. It was maybe macabre, maybe somewhat unhealthy, but she slept better with him there. He kept the nightmares away.

As she slid the book back into its place on the bookshelf, she again thought that, yes, it was a good book. Deeply painful at times. But it was nice to feel like she knew Littlepip. So many of her new friends did, and (despite some of her bad times) she seemed like such a nice pony.

Fluttershy had tried to talk to Littlepip once. But even being in one of the tower stations made her very uncomfortable. The Single Pegasus Project, she had to admit, freaked her out. Littlepip had called it "peaceful", but Fluttershy had panic attacks at the mere thought of the place – of being trapped, unable to move, watching helplessly.

She felt her heart racing and shoved the memory away. That place was on her list of things not to think about too much. Sometimes, her mind was like a minefield. She had to be careful where she stepped.

Still, she had recovered. Mostly. It had taken years, yes.

She smiled a little, the sort of smile you could only manage looking back on something from a great distance. Her well-intentioned friends had swiftly taken her to Spike's cave, thinking it would help her to be with someone she knew.

Two hundred years as a tree had done nothing to dampen her phobia of dragons.

Of course, she hadn't recognized him. He'd grown up! And, true, she'd seen him grown up once before, but that was an unnatural and temporary growth, not like the real thing. He looked completely different. He had wings, for one thing.

"I'm sorry I scared you," she remembered Spike saying one day after she'd finally been able to more than squeak and cower in response. "It was the eyepatch, wasn't it? Dammit, I was going for 'jaunty'. But I think it just makes me look like a raider."

It had not been the eyepatch. If anything, the eyepatch was… nice. Made him look dapper. She told him so.

Fluttershy lowered her nose and nudged the book fully into place.

Yes, she thought for a third time, it was a good book. Sometimes, though, she thought it had a bad title. In her mind, it was more than just the story of a single mare. It was a story of Equestria. The Equestria that had been, the Equestrian Wasteland that is, and the hopes for the New Equestria that was beginning to bloom.

“Maybe the story should have Equestria in its name?” she asked herself.

More than that, it was the story of the birth of the fledgling forces of good in the Equestrian Wasteland. The New Canterlot Republic, the Applejack’s Rangers, even the Followers of the Apocalypse had their origins in this story.

And she shouldn’t forget the Twilight Society whose megaspell had turned them into a superpower in the Wasteland. They were good and helpful ponies too. Mostly. Usually.

Fluttershy crossed the reading room and stepped out into the pure sunlight that poured down on Junction Town. She blinked, adjusting to the brightness as she felt the warmth of the sun penetrate her feathers and coat.

Ahead and to the left, Velvet Remedy was talking to some of the medical ponies near the clinic. To her right, the laughter of the playing children tickled the air. Straight ahead, at the far wall of the mission, she spotted Palette and her apprentice Silver Bell. The older mare was guiding the adolescent unicorn as she used her magic put the finishing touches on a stained-glass window. Fluttershy guessed the window was for the New Canterlot castle.

She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath. The scents of dust and lavender trees mixed with a hint of rosewood and cinnamon from Brandy’s cookhouse.

“Ohh, smell that air!” she said softly to her friends in her saddleboxes. It was the smell of everything being good in the world.

She turned to watch the children. Thunder Rush’s little brother was pestering the apricot pegasus. She tilted her ears to catch the conversation.

“I can name all the presidents of the New Canted-lots Republic!” the little one boasted, so cute he made Fluttershy snicker.

“Pffft,” Rush said, blowing her sibling off. “That’s easy. There’s only been two. Try something harder.”

The tiny colt tried again, “um… I can name all the Princesses of Old Equestria!”

“Ugh. Equally easy isn’t harder.”

Fluttershy sighed, shaking her head, and took a step.

She eeped as a young voice cried out, “Hey, Fluttershy!”

Turning, she saw the pink alicorn filly fly up unsteadily, her face wide and smiling. “Oh, hello Surprise,” Fluttershy greeted her. Surprise was the third alicorn to be successfully birthed, and the first alicorn to have a coat that wasn’t blue, green or purple.

“Look what I can do!” the alicorn filly beamed happily.

Her little face scrunched in concentration. Her horn flickered and began to glow, small sparks erupting from its tip. A blob of magical energy formed above the little alicorn; it melted down around her, forming a magical shield. The fragile magical sphere lasted only a moment before popping like a soap bubble, but the alicorn’s eyes looked up with glee.

"Oh that's very good, Surprise!" Fluttershy cooed. "You're getting ever so much better. Your parents must be *so* proud."

Still, she couldn't help but suppress an involuntary shudder, her eyes drifting towards the mountains… and towards Glyphmark. She knew better than to worry. Xenith, of all zebras, wouldn't allow them to be anything but extra cautious. Still, the brew they created to turn alicorns male, the potion that allowed them to breed, required extract of *killing joke* as an ingredient. And that meant the Angels were *cultivating* it over there.

No. No. No. Stop thinking about things on the list. You know it's not healthy.

Surprise squeaked in delight and fluttered away seeking another adult to show off to.

Fluttershy slowly walked down the cobblestone street that wove through the mission. She passed Brandy trotting the other way, pulling a cart of vegetables from the gardens. She exchanged greetings with the young cook, feeling fleetingly disappointed that she wouldn't get to taste the soup and salad being planned for tonight. But she wasn't going to be here.

The Equestrian Wasteland was producing enough food now for its population to begin to prosper, ponies and non-ponies alike. Three years ago, Littlepip had cleared the last of the cloud curtain. Her continued habitation in the Celestia Hub being as much out of dedication to a promise as it was for psychological and physiological concerns. (The former she empathized with all too well; the latter regarded the small mare's development of a constitutional weakness, her multiple exposures to Pink Cloud and broadcasters having taken their toll.) Plus, while not constantly minded, the weather still needed to be regulated so that the farms could run at maximum production. And sadly, it would probably be generations before the rest of Equestria was willing to trust the weather to the pegasi again.

Yes, food was no longer a necessity that ponies needed to struggle or bleed for. The New Canterlot Republic ensured that the bounty was distributed generously to all, and the Talons kept the farms and caravans safe from gangs and other marauders who would attempt to seize control.

Rather, the national concern had turned once again to power. The Gardens of Equestria had given back their farmlands, but had stripped them of the radioactive materials necessary to run Red Eye's engines. For now, most of the energy used by the NCR was generated from devices drawing on star batteries (a donation from Calamity, she had been told). But these resources were finite and heavily strained; the needs of the nation would soon far exceed the limited power they could produce.

Fluttershy cringed at the notion that Equestria's power might soon become dependant on irradiated rocks and other materials that could only be found in foreign lands. She'd seen the land she loved go down that road before. It did not end well.

Getting *Aqua Cura* was bad enough.

Several field mice scampered across the street. Fluttershy flapped her wings, lifting her hooves off the cobblestones, giving them space to pass. An iridescent bird of golden and emerald plumage shot down out of the sky, snatching one of them up. The balefire phoenix shot into the air, lifting up ten yards, and dropped her prey onto the stones below, the fall breaking the little mouse's back.

"oh… h-hello, Ph… Pyrelight," Fluttershy squeaked as Pyrelight dropped onto her prey and started to eat.

For a moment, she had almost called the balefire phoenix Philomena. But Pyrelight wasn't the same bird as the one that had been Princess Celestia's pet. At least, she was pretty sure they weren't the same bird. But the similarities were striking enough that Fluttershy was sure they were from a common family. Cousins. Maybe even sisters.

Pyrelight looked up at Fluttershy, mouse intestines dangling from her beak, and squawked pleasantly. Fluttershy bit back the urge to grimace, smiling approvingly at the predator instead. She had been with Velvet Remedy through Pyrelight's last two natural renewal cycles, the first time helping the unicorn accept the seemingly horrible decline of her pet's health.

Fluttershy flew past, landing a few yards ahead and continuing on her way.

Ahead, she noticed that Palette and Silver Bell had paused in their work to watch Surprise show them her shield bubble.

A chime sounded, crystalline and clear, ringing across the mission. She perked up, looking to the sky above the gate. Other ponies trotted about her, headed to see. Silver Bell galloped past her, her mentor trotting more leisurely behind; Velvet Remedy joined her side. Surprise followed the promise that there were more adults to show off to. One of the caravans was home.

Even before she recognized the silhouette, the glints of metal under his wing and on his foreleg told Fluttershy that it was Calamity who had come home. It was good to see him again, and not just because he was going to be her ride this afternoon.

She'd always been a weak flyer, even in her youth. And she wasn't young anymore. The only pink in her mane now was from the streaks Silver Bell had put in it while practicing cosmetic spells.

Fluttershy felt confident in flying across Junction Town, maybe even to where they were building the new castle. But not all the way to Bucklyn Cross.

The heavy gate doors squealed, pulled open by ponies on pedal-machines made from old Griffinchasers. As Calamity landed inside, the caravan he guarded began through the doors. She trotted forward, her eyes moving to each pony, counting manes. She breathed a sigh of relief she didn't realize she was holding in as everypony was accounted for. She supposed she'd been a little worried. The trip to Thunderfall City and back wasn't as dangerous as it used to be, but it was good to see them back and in one piece.

"Aww," Silver Bell pouted. "I was hoping it would be mom and dad."

Ditzy Doo's caravan was due back today as well, she realized, and from a much more treacherous journey. It was for the ghouls of Equestria. Their bodies could not heal without radiation, and after the Gardens of Equestria had been activated, there was no radiation in Equestria anymore. Every week, brave caravans like Ditzy Doo's were making the trek beyond Equestria's borders to the rad-pits in the blighted neighboring lands, filling barrels with the irradiated water that the ghouls at home needed to survive.

(Ditzy Doo was, however, the only one to have decided to brand her water deliveries. *Absolutely Everything* was Equestria's source for *Aqua Cura.* Free on request with any size of purchase, no matter how small.)

"Dirty water" caravans were all too often targets of bandits and other awful ponies. She understood Silver Bell's anxiety.

The caravan was already crowded by ponies when she reached it. Some were helping unload. Most were just eager to hear about the trip.

"…on our way there, we ran inta raiders out near Hope," Calamity was telling Velvet Remedy, shaking his head sadly. "They hit the outpost there. Weren't much left o' it when we reached it."

"Raiders?" Velvet gasped. "But… we haven't seen those in years! Are you sure it wasn't one of the gangs?"

"Gangs don't do t' ponies what these monsters did," Calamity snorted, drawing down his silver cowpony hat. "But don't worry. They won't be doin' nothin' t' anypony ever again."

Fluttershy watched as the two married ponies began to sketch out plans to send a group out to properly tend to the dead at the Hope Outpost.

"Ah'm off wi' 'Shy t' Bucklyn Cross this evenin'. Might want t' get some o' the Talon boys t' provide cover," Calamity suggested finally. "Ah got 'em all, Ah'm sure of it. But better play it safe. Jus' in case."

The rust-coated cyberpony turned to her, "Ah'll be ready t' go in an hour, iffin y'all are ready."

"Oh! Yes, thank you. If that's okay with you." She paused, then asked, "Do you think it will be dangerous?"

"Shucks, no," Calamity smiled. "We'll likely get a few rogue winds, but the Junction Town to Bucklyn Cross is one o' the safest routes in all Equestria." Well, now that bloodwing mating season had passed, at least.

"Rogue winds?"

"It's Homage's birthday, so sh'e up in the Celestia Hub with Li'lpip," Calamity informed her. "Ah hear they're spendin' the whole day in the Autumn Vestibule."

"Ohh," Fluttershy squeaked. "How romantic."

Calamity turned to his wife with a smirk. "Homage wanted me t' remind ya that this is the last birthday she's got before she's officially old an' decrepit." He playfully poked Velvet Remedy with a hoof as she scowled and pouted. Fluttershy's eyes were drawn to the golden PipBuck on his foreleg, the two jewels embedded in it taking the shapes of a hammer and a screwdriver.

"What's decrepit?" Surprise piped up, looking to the adults curiously.

"In this case?" Palette answered, lowering her head to mock-whisper to the little pink alicorn, "It means the same age Velvet was when she left her Stable."

Velvet Remedy tossed her mane back and nickered indignantly.

⁂

Dusk was settling over Equestria. The dipping sun glowed between the skeletal monuments of Manehattan's ruined skyscrapers. Dingy light and fading shadows stretched across Fetlock. The wind sent ripples across the lake and through the lush hills of grass.

She stood in the back of the sky chariot, staring down as Fetlock passed below. She could see the lights of the settlement built around the Applejack's Rangers' stronghold, a bastion of life in a sea of wreckage.

"Did you see Ponyville?" she asked suddenly.

"Ayep," Calamity answered as he flew, pulling the chariot behind him. "They seem t' be doin' alright. Fer hellhounds. Not even raiders are stupid enough t' wander near Ponyville."

Ten years ago, a megaspell destroyed the hellhound's home in Splendid Valley. A few dozen of the survivors had surfaced in the ruins of the town that had once been her home. The home of her friends. Now, it was home to maybe a score of hellhound families.

As Calamity guided the sky chariot towards those hills, Fluttershy knew where they were going. Part of her mind insisted on envisioning this place as it once was. She and her friends had once gone golfing on these very hills, back before the war was even a whisper. She remembered Angel had gotten bored and started gnawing on the canopy of their golf cart until she cajoled him to stop.

But this place wasn't a golf course anymore.

Calamity brought the sky chariot down on the wind-stroked grass and unhitched himself. Fluttershy spread her wings, dipping her head to pick up the bundles of flowers that had accompanied her for this much of the journey.

The two pegasi approached the five tombstones. Fluttershy dropped the flowers at her hooves, letting Calamity pick up several of them to place at the gravestone of Elder "SteelHooves" Applesnack. She scooped up the others, and began reverently placing them at each of the other four graves which fanned out behind that first one as Calamity took a few minutes of quiet with his departed friend.

A soft pang filled her heart as Fluttershy wished she had found the time to know Applesnack better. She stopped at the gravestone nearest to Applesnack's, reading the inscription:

Here Rests
PALADIN STRAWBERRY LEMONADE
Brave, Loyal, True
She gave her life that Equestria may blossom once again.

The other three markers had similar epitaphs.

The wind began to pick up, tugging at her silvered mane with its streaks of pink. She planted the last of the flowers and turned back to Calamity.

The stallion was staring upwards and towards the east. She followed his gaze, spotting the gaunt, flying forms of two ghoul pegasi pulling a water-cart, leading the other water wagons as the caravan flew towards Junction Town.

She knew one of those lead ghouls would have a golden PipBuck on her foreleg with seven diamonds arranged like bubbles. Ditzy Doo, the Bearer of Laughter. Who ever could have imagined?

It warmed her heart that her old friend had found love in the Equestrian Wasteland. If anypony in Equestria deserved happiness, Fluttershy thought, it was her. As she watched them pass, she believed she saw the pale stallion beside Ditzy Doo glance at his love, the Canterlot ghoul's normal grimace fading into a look of silent adoration.

He caught her. His little falling star.

A strange thought crossed her mind as she mused that Ditzy Doo and Lionheart reminded her, just a little, of Applejack and Applesnack.

As if reading her thoughts (a very disturbing notion!), Calamity stepped next to her, expressing, "Ah ain't normally the religious type, but Ah've seen 'nuff t' know souls exist. So part o' me likes t' imagine that somewhere up there, SteelHooves an' his gal are smilin' down on those two."

Fluttershy nodded quietly.

The winds continued to blow, making the trees creek and the water of the lake lap at the shore.

* * *

Sunset poured out its beautiful palette across Equestria, painting the sky in oranges and purples, blues and golds. Sunlight glinted off the broken windows of the dead Manehattan skyscrapers, looking like a scattering of jewels, and shimmered on the river that flowed around Bucklyn Cross.

The butter-yellow pegasus stretched her wings, standing on the edge of the fortress, her eyes looking out over the river, watching the slowly gliding boats, then lifting beyond. She could see Gummy's home from here. Like Ditzy Doo, another strand of the past that persisted in the present, tugging at her heart. Painful, but still precious. Like anchors that kept her from blowing away in the wind.

She glanced downward, seeing the black scar of the Arbu prison. Calamity was down there somewhere, visiting a pony he had described as "an old friend who looks a lot like me". It saddened her that there was still a need for such places in Equestria. But not all ponies in the Wasteland were willing embrace their better virtues, to be good ponies.

Every pony, she still believed, had goodness inside them. But she had learned the hardest possible way that you couldn't assume ponies would do the right thing. Which made those who did all the more wonderful and precious.

She felt the presence of the hellhound as he came up behind her. The old cyberhound crouched down next to her, his cyberleg giving a metallic whine. At last, the aging albino spoke, "You ready fer this?"

Fluttershy nodded.

She would not allow the new age of Equestria to be born out of genocide. The hellhounds were on the precipice of extinction, and it was (largely) the fault of ponies.

Wanted or not, warranted or not, she had been once again put in a position where her words carried weight. And as much as she hated being looked to as a leader, she wasn't going to shy away. Not after everything. This is something she must do. She must.

She must.

The Applejack's Rangers weren't going to be happy about it, but she would convince them. The Hellhound Sanctuary was the right thing to do.

The elderly albino hellhound got back up as she turned around, and followed her as she marched toward the council hall.

A stiff wind cut through her feathers, chilling her. The sun began to sink beneath the waves.

Fluttershy took a deep breath. The day was almost over. And it had been a day without gunshots. A peaceful day. A better day.

"In a world filled with misery and uncertainty, it is a great comfort to know that, in

the end, there is a light in darkness."

Fallout: Equestria

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zemming
Head of the Fallout Equestria Print Project